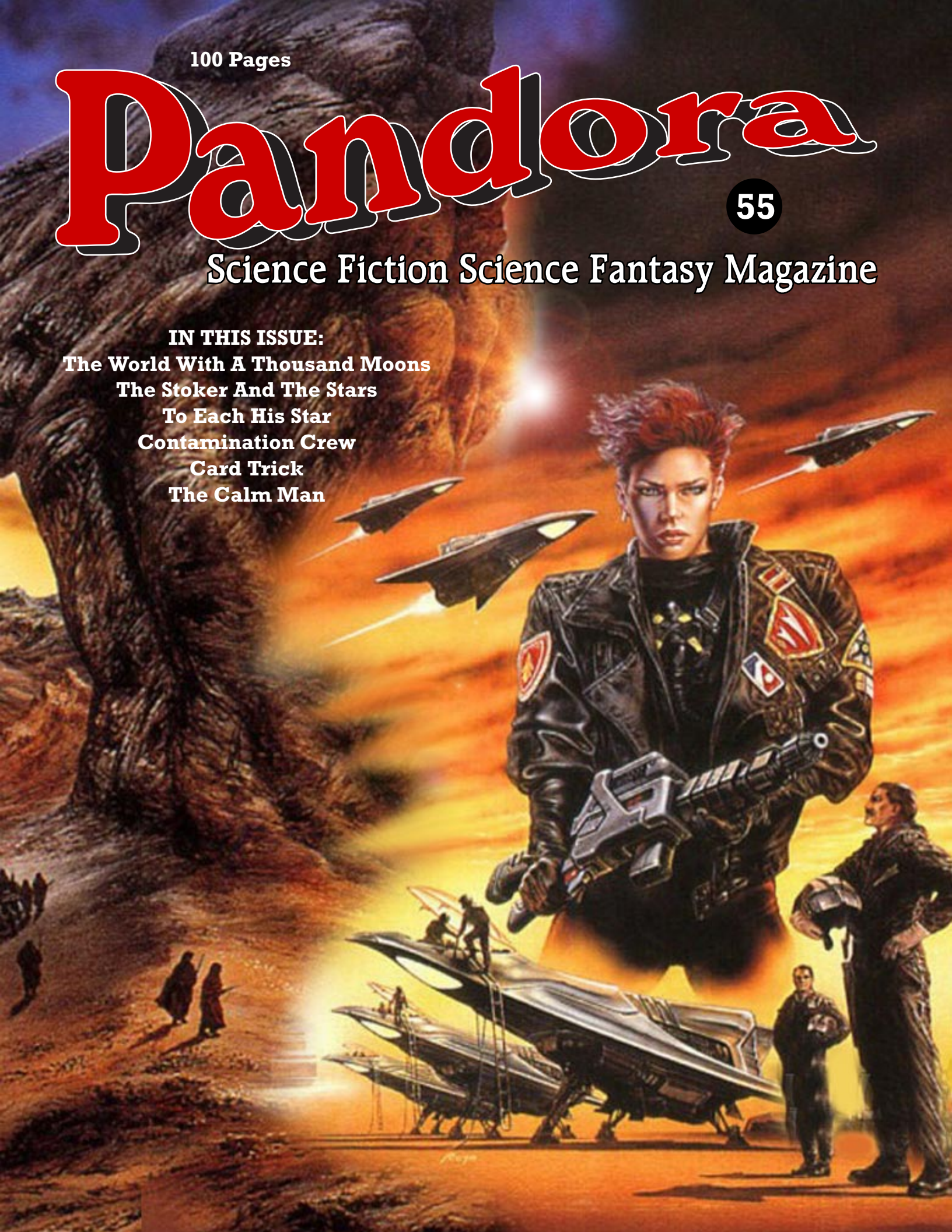
100 Pages
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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine
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THE WORLD WITH A THOUSAND MOONS

Grim death was the only romance to be found on this world that boasted a thousand moons

CHAPTER 1

Thrill Cruise

Lance Kenniston felt the cold realization of failure as he came out of the building into the sharp chill of the Martian night. He stood for a moment, his lean, drawn face haggard in the light of the two hurtling moons.

He looked hopelessly across the dark spaceport. It was a large one, for this ancient town of Syrtis was the main port of Mars. The forked light of the flying moons showed many ships docked on the tarmac—a big liner, several freighters, a small, shining cruiser and other small craft. And for lack of one of those ships, his hopes were ruined!

A squat, brawny figure in shapeless space-jacket came to Kenniston's side. It was Holk Or, the Jovian who had been waiting for him.

"What luck?" asked the Jovian in a rumbling whisper.

"It's hopeless," Kenniston answered heavily. "There isn't a small cruiser to be had at any price. The meteor-miners buy up all small ships here."

"The devil!" muttered Holk Or, dismayed. "What are we going to do? Go on to Earth and get a cruiser there?"

"We can't do that," Kenniston answered. "You know we've got to get back to that asteroid within two weeks. We've got to get a ship here."

Desperation made Kenniston's voice taut. His lean, hard face was bleak with knowledge of disastrous failure.

The big Jovian scratched his head. In the shifting moonslight his battered green face expressed ignorant perplexity as he stared across the busy spaceport.

"That shiny little cruiser there would be just the thing," Holk Or muttered, looking at the gleaming, torpedo-shaped craft nearby. "It would hold all the stuff we've got to take; and with robot controls we two could run it."

"We haven't a chance to get that craft," Kenniston told him. "I found out that it's under charter to a bunch of rich Earth youngsters who came out here in it for a pleasure cruise. A girl named Loring, heiress to Loring Radium, is the head of the party."

The Jovian swore. "Just the ship we

need, and a lot of spoiled kids are using it for thrill-hunting!"

Kenniston had an idea. "It might be," he said slowly, "that they're tired of the cruise by this time and would sell us the craft. I think I'll go up to the Terra Hotel and see this Loring girl."

"Sure, let's try it anyway," Holk Or agreed.

The Earthman looked at him anxiously. "Oughtn't you to keep under cover, Holk? The Planet Patrol has had your record on file for a long time. If you happened to be recognized—"

"Bah, they think I'm dead, don't they?" scoffed the Jovian. "There's no danger of us getting picked up."

Kenniston was not so sure, but he was too driven by urgent need to waste time in argument. With the Jovian clumping along beside him, he made his way from the spaceport across the ancient Martian city.

The dark streets of old Syrtis were not crowded. Martians are not a nocturnal people and only a few were abroad in the chill darkness, even they being wrapped in heavy synthewool cloaks from which only their bald red heads and solemn, cadaverous faces protruded.

Earthmen were fairly numerous in this main port of the planet. Swaggering space-sailors, prosperous-looking traders and rough meteor-miners made up the most of them. There were a few tourists gaping at the grotesque old black stone buildings, and under a krypton-bulb at a corner, two men in the drab uniform of the Patrol stood eyeing passersby sharply. Kenniston breathed more easily when he and the Jovian had passed the two officers without challenge.

he Terra Hotel stood in a garden at the edge of town, fronting the moonlit immensity of the desert. This glittering glass block, especially built to cater to the tourist trade from Earth, was Earth-conditioned inside. Its gravitation, air pressure and humidity were ingeniously maintained at Earth standards for the greater comfort of its patrons.

Kenniston felt oddly oppressed by the warm, soft air inside the resplendent lobby. He had spent so much of his time away from Earth that he had become more or less adapted to thinner, colder atmospheres.

"Miss Gloria Loring?" repeated the immaculate young Earthman behind the information desk. His eyes appraised Kenniston's shabby space-jacket and the hulking green Jovian. "I am afraid..."

"I'm here to see her on important business, by appointment," Kenniston snapped.

The clerk melted at once. "Oh, I see! I believe that Miss Loring's party is now in The Bridge. That's our cocktail room—top floor."

Kenniston felt badly out of place, riding up in the magnetic lift with Holk Or. The other people in the car, Earthmen and women in the shimmering synthesilks of the latest formal dress, stared at him and the Jovian as though wondering how they had ever gained admittance.

The lights, silks and perfumes made

Kenniston feel even shabbier than he was. All this luxury was a far cry from the hard, dangerous life he had led for so long amid the wild asteroids and moons of the outer planets.

It was worse up in the glittering cocktail room atop the hotel. The place had glassite walls and ceiling, and was designed to give an impression of the navigating bridge of a space-ship. The orchestra played behind a phony control-board of instruments and rocket-controls. Meaningless space-charts hung on the walls for decoration. It was just the sort of pretentious sham, Kenniston thought contemptuously, to appeal to tourists.

"Some crowd!" muttered Holk Or, looking over the tables of richly dressed and jewelled people. His small eyes gleamed. "What a place to loot!"

"Shut up!" Kenniston muttered hastily. He asked a waiter for the Loring party, and was conducted to a table in a corner.

There were a half dozen people at the table, most of them young Earthmen and girls. They were drinking pink Martian desert-wine, except for one sulky-looking youngster who had stuck to Earth whisky.

One of the girls turned and looked at Kenniston with cool, insolently uninterested gaze when the waiter whispered to her politely.

"I'm Gloria Loring," she drawled. "What did you want to see me about?"

She was dark and slim, and surprisingly young. There were almost childish lines to the bare shoulders revealed by her low golden gown. Her thoroughbred grace and beauty were spoiled for Kenniston by the bored look in her clear dark eyes and the faintly disdainful droop of her mouth.

The chubby, rosy youth beside her goggled in simulated amazement and terror at the battered green Jovian behind Kenniston. He set down his glass with a theatrical gesture of horror.

"This Martian liquor has got me!" he exclaimed. "I can see a little green man!"

Holk Or started wrathfully forward. "Why, that young pup—"

Kenniston hastily restrained him with a gesture. He turned back to the table. Some of the girls were giggling.

"Be quiet, Robbie," Gloria Loring was telling the chubby young comedian. She turned her cool gaze back to Kenniston. "Well?"

"Miss Loring, I heard down at the spaceport that you are the charterer of that small cruiser, the Sunsprite," Kenniston explained. "I need a craft like that very badly. If you would part with her, I'd be glad to pay almost any price for your charter."

he girl looked at him in astonishment. "Why in the world should I let you have our cruiser?"

Kenniston said earnestly, "Your party could travel just as well and a lot more comfortably by liner. And getting a cruiser like that is a life-or-death business for me right now."

"I'm not interested in your business, Mr. Kenniston," drawled Gloria Loring. "And I certainly don't propose to alter

our plans just to help a stranger out of his difficulties."

Kenniston flushed from the cool rebuke. He stood there, suddenly feeling a savage dislike for the whole pampered group of them.

"Beside that," the girl continued, "we chose the cruiser for this trip because we wanted to get off the beaten track of liner routes, and see something new. We're going from here out to Jupiter's moons."

Kenniston perceived that these bored, spoiled youngsters were out here hunting for new thrills on the interplanetary frontier. His dislike of them increased.

A clean-cut, sober-faced young man who seemed older and more serious than the rest of the party, was speaking to the heiress.

"Unhardened space-travellers like us are likely to get hit by gravitation paralysis out in the outer planets, Gloria," he was saying to the heiress. "I don't think we ought to go farther out than Mars."

Gloria looked at him mockingly. "If you're scared, Hugh, why did you leave your nice safe office on Earth and come along with us?"

The chubby youth called Robbie laughed loudly. "We all know why Hugh Murdock came along. It's not thrills he wants—it's you, Gloria."

They were all ignoring Kenniston now. He felt that he had been dismissed but he was desperately reluctant to lose his last hope of getting a ship. Somehow he must get that cruiser!

A stratagem occurred to him. If these spoiled scions wouldn't give up their ship, at least he might induce them to go where he wanted.

Kenniston hesitated. It would mean leading them all into the deadliest kind of peril. But a man's life depended on it. A man who was worth all these rich young wastrels put together. He decided to try it.

"Miss Loring, if it's thrills you're after, maybe I can furnish them," Kenniston said. "Maybe we can team up on this. How would you like to go on a voyage after the biggest treasure in the System?"

"Treasure?" exclaimed the heiress surprisedly. "Where is it?"

They were all leaning forward, with quick interest. Kenniston saw that his bait had caught them.

"You've heard of John Dark, the notorious space-pirate?" he asked.

Gloria nodded. "Of course. The telenews was full of his exploits until the Patrol caught and destroyed his ship a few weeks ago."

Kenniston corrected her. "The Patrol caught up to John Dark's ship in the asteroid, but didn't completely destroy it. They gunned the pirate craft to a wreck in a running fight. But Dark's wrecked ship drifted into a dangerous zone of meteor swarms where they couldn't follow."

"I remember now—that's what the telenews said," conceded the heiress. "But Dark and his crew were undoubtedly killed, they said."

"John Dark," Kenniston went on,

"looted scores of ships during his career. He amassed a hoard of jewels and precious metals. And he kept it right with him in his ship. That treasure's still in that lost wreck."

"How do you know?" asked Hugh Murdock bluntly.

"Because I found the lost wreck of Dark's ship myself," Kenniston answered. He hated to lie like this, but knew that he had no choice.

He plunged on. "I'm a meteor-miner by profession. Two weeks ago my Jovian partner and I were prospecting in the outer asteroid zone in our little rocket. Our air-tanks got low and to replenish them, we landed on the asteroid Vesta. That's the big asteroid they call the World with a Thousand Moons, because it's circled by a swarm of hundreds of meteors.

"It's a weird, jungled little world, inhabited by some very queer forms of life. In landing, my partner and I noticed where some great object had crashed down into the jungle. We discovered it was the wreck of John Dark's ship. The wreck had drifted until it crashed on Vesta, almost completely burying itself in the ground. No one was alive on it, of course."

Kenniston concluded. "We knew Dark's treasure must still be in the buried wreck. But it would take machinery and equipment to dig out the wreck. So we came here to Mars, intending to get a small cruiser, load it with the necessary equipment, and go back to Vesta and lift the treasure. Only we haven't been able to get a ship of any kind."

He leaned toward the girl. "Here's my proposition, Miss Loring. You take us and our equipment to Vesta in your cruiser, and we'll share the treasure with you fifty-fifty. What do you say?"

The blonde girl beside Gloria uttered a squeal of excitement. "Pirate treasure! Gloria, let's do it—what a thrill it would be!"

The others showed equal excitement. The romance of a treasure hunt in the wild asteroids lured them, rather than the possible rewards.

"We'd certainly be able to take back a wonderful story to Earth if we found John Dark's treasure," admitted Gloria, with quick, eager interest.

Hugh Murdock was an exception to the general enthusiasm. He asked Kenniston, "How do you know the treasure's still in the buried wreck?"

"Because the wreck was still undisturbed," Kenniston answered. "And because we found these jewels on the body of one of John Dark's crew, who had been flung clear somehow when the wreck crashed."

He held out a half-dozen gems he took from his pocket. They were Saturnian moon-stones, softly shining white jewels whose brilliance waxed and waned in perfect periodic rhythm.

"These jewels," Kenniston said, "must have been that pirate's share of the loot. You can imagine how rich John Dark's own hoard must be."

The jewels, worth many thousands, swept away the lingering incredulity of the others as Kenniston had known they would.

"You're sure no one else knows the wreck is there?" Gloria asked breathlessly.

"We kept our find absolutely secret," Kenniston told her. "But since I can't get a ship any other way, I'm willing to share the hoard with you. If I wait too long, someone else may find the wreck."

"I accept your proposition, Mr. Kenniston!" Gloria declared. "We'll start for Vesta just as soon as you can get the equipment you'll need loaded on the Sunsprite."

"Gloria, you're being too hasty," protested Hugh Murdock. "I've heard of this world with a Thousand Moons. There're stories of queer, unhuman creatures they call Vestans, who infest that asteroid. The danger—"

Gloria impatiently dismissed his objections. "Hugh, if you are going to start worrying about dangers again, you'd better go back to Earth and safety."

Murdock flushed and was silent. Kenniston felt a certain sympathy for the young businessman. He knew, if these others did not, just how real was the alien menace of those strange creatures, the Vestans.

"I'll go right down to the spaceport and see about loading the equipment aboard your cruiser," Kenniston told the heiress. "You'd better give me a note to your captain. We ought to be able to start tomorrow."

"Pirate treasure on an unexplored asteroid!" exulted the enthusiastic Robbie. "Ho for the World with a Thousand Moons!"

Kenniston felt guilty when he and Holk Or left the big hotel. These youngsters, he thought, hadn't the faintest idea of the peril into which he was leading them. They were as ignorant as babies of the dark evil and unearthly danger of the interplanetary frontier.

He hardened himself against the qualms of conscience. There was that at stake, he told himself fiercely, against which the safety of a lot of spoiled, rich young people was absolutely nothing.

Holk Or was chuckling as they emerged into the chill Martian night. He told Kenniston admiringly, "That was one of the smoothest jobs of lying I ever heard, that story about finding John Dark's treasure. Take it from me, it was slick!"

The Jovian guffawed loudly as he added, "What would their faces be like if they knew that John Dark and his crew are still living? That it was John Dark himself who sent us here?"

"Be quiet, you idiot!" ordered Kenniston hastily. "Do you want the whole Patrol to hear you?"

CHAPTER II

Discovered

The Sunsprite throbbed steadily through the vast, dangerous wilderness of the asteroidal zone. To the eye, the cruiser moved in a black void starred by creeping crumbs of light. In reality those bright, crawling specks were booming asteroids or whirling meteor-swarms rushing in complicated, unchartable orbits and constantly threatening destruction.

For three days now, the cruiser had cautiously groped deeper into this most perilous region of the System. Now a bright, tiny disk of white light was shining far ahead like a beckoning beacon. It was the asteroid Vesta—their goal.

Kenniston, leaning against the glassite deck-wall, somberly eyed the distant asteroid.

"We'll reach it by tomorrow," he thought. "Then what? I suppose John Dark will hold these rich youngsters for ransom."

Kenniston knew that the pirate leader would instantly see the chance of extorting vast sums by holding this group of wealthy young people as captives.

"I wish to God I hadn't had to bring them into this," Kenniston sweated. "But what else could I do? It was the only way I could get back to Vesta with the materials."

His mind was going back over the disastrous events since the day three weeks before, when the Patrol had caught up to John Dark at last.

Dark's pirate ship, the Falcon, had been gunned to a helpless wreck. It had, fortunately for the pirates, drifted off into a region of perilous meteor-swarms where the Patrol cruisers dared not follow. The Patrol thought everybody on the pirate ship dead anyway, Kenniston knew.

But John Dark and most of his crew were still alive in the drifting wreck. They had fought the battle wearing space-suits, and that had saved them. They had clung grimly to the wreck as it drifted on and on until it finally fell into the feeble gravitational pull of Vesta.

Kenniston could still remember those tense hours when the wreck had fallen through the satellite swarm of meteors onto the World with a Thousand Moons. They had managed to cushion their crash. John Dark, always the most resourceful of men, had managed to jury-rig makeshift rocket-tubes that had softened the impact of their fall.

But the wrecked Falcon had been marooned there in the weird asteroidal jungle, with the alien, menacing Vestans already gathering around it. The ship would never fly space again until major repairs were made. And they could not be made until quantities of material and equipment were brought. Someone must go for those materials to Mars, the nearest planet.

John Dark had superintended construction of a little two-man rocket from parts of the ship. Kenniston and Holk Or were to go in it.

"You must be back with that list of equipment and materials within two weeks, Kenniston," Dark had emphasized. "If we stay castaway here longer than that, either the Vestans will get us or the Patrol discover us."

The pirate leader had added, "The moon-jewels I've given you will more than pay for a small cruiser, if you can buy one at Mars. If you can't buy one, get one any way you can—but get back here quickly!"

Well, Kenniston thought grimly, he had got a cruiser in the only way he could. Down in its hold were the

berylloy plates and spare rocket-tubes and new cyclotrons he had had loaded aboard at Syrtis.

But he was also bringing back to Vesta with him a bunch of thrill-seeking, rich, young people who believed they were going on a romantic treasure-hunt. What would they think of him when they discovered how he had betrayed them?

"That's Vesta, isn't it?" spoke a girl's eager voice behind him, interrupting his dark thoughts.

Kenniston turned quickly. It was Gloria Loring, boyish in silken space-slacks, her hands thrust into the pockets.

There was a naive eagerness in her clear, lovely face as she looked toward the distant asteroid, that made her look more like an excited small girl than like the bored, jewelled heiress of that night at Syrtis.

"Yes, that's the World with a Thousand Moons," Kenniston nodded. "We'll reach it by tomorrow. I've just been up on the bridge, telling your Captain Walls the safest route through the meteor swarms."

Her dark eyes studied him curiously. "You've been out here on the frontier a long time, haven't you?"

"Twelve years," he told her. "That's a long time in the outer planets. Most space-men don't last that long out here—wrecks, accidents or gravitation-paralysis gets them."

"Gravitation-paralysis?" she repeated. "I've heard of that as a terrible danger to space-travelers. But I don't really know what it is."

"It's the most dreaded danger of all out here," Kenniston answered. "A paralysis that hits you when you change from very weak to very strong gravities or vice versa, too often. It locks all your muscles rigid by numbing the motor-nerves."

Gloria shivered. "That sounds ghastly."

"It is," Kenniston said somberly. "I've seen scores of my friends stricken down by it, in the years I've sailed the outer System."

"I didn't know you'd been a space-sailor all that time," the heiress said wonderingly. "I thought you said you were a meteor-miner."

Kenniston woke up to the fact that he had made a bad slip. He hastily covered up. "You have to be a good bit of a space-sailor to be a meteor-miner, Miss Loring. You have to cover a lot of territory."

He was thankful that they were interrupted at that moment by some of the others who came along the deck in a lively, chattering group.

Robbie Boone was the center of the group. That chubby, clownish young man, heir to the Atomic Power Corporation millions, had garbed himself in what he fondly believed to be a typical space-man's outfit. His jacket and slacks were of black synthesilk, and he wore a big atom-pistol.

"Hiya, pal!" he grinned cherubically at Kenniston. "When does this here crate of ours jet down at Vesta?"

"If you knew how silly you looked, Robbie," said Gloria devastatingly, "try-

ing to dress and talk like an old spaceman."

"You're just jealous," Robbie defied. "I look all right, don't I, Kenniston?"

Kenniston's lips twitched. "You'd certainly create a sensation if you walked into the Spaceman's Rendezvous in Jovopolis."

Alice Krim, a featherheaded little blonde, eyed Kenniston admiringly. "You've been to an awful lot of planets, haven't you?" she sighed.

"Turn it off, Alice," said Gloria dryly. "Mr. Kenniston doesn't flirt."

Arthur Lanning, the sulky, handsome youngster who always had a drink in his hand, drawled. "Then you've tried him out, Gloria?"

The heiress' dark eyes snapped, but she was spared a reply by the appearance of Mrs. Milsom. That dumpy, fluttery woman, the nominal chaperone of the group, immediately seized upon Kenniston as usual.

"Mr. Kenniston, are you sure this asteroid we're going to is safe?" she asked him for the hundredth time. "Is there a good hotel there?"

"A good hotel there?" Kenniston was too astounded to answer, for a moment.

nto his mind had risen memory of the savage, choking green jungles of the World with a Thousand Moons; of the slithering creatures slipping through the fronds, of the rustling presence of the dreaded Vestans who could never quite be seen; of the pirate wreck around which John Dark and half a hundred of the System's most hardened outlaws waited.

"Of course there's no hotel there, Aunty," Gloria said disgustedly. "Can't you understand that this asteroid's almost unexplored?"

Holk Or had come up, and the big Jovian had heard. He broke into a booming laugh. "A hotel on Vesta! That's a good one!"

Kenniston flashed the big green pirate a warning glance. Robbie Boone was asking him, "Will there be any good hunting there?"

"Sure there will," Holk Or declared. His small eyes gleamed with secret humor. "You're going to find lots of adventure there, my lad."

When Mrs. Milsom had dragged the others away for the usual afternoon game of "dimension bridge," the Jovian looked after them, chuckling.

"This crowd of idiots hadn't ought to have ever left Earth. What a surprise they're going to get on Vesta!"

"They're not such a bad bunch, at bottom," Kenniston said halfheartedly. "Just a lot of ignorant kids looking for adventure."

"Bah, you're falling for the Loring girl," scoffed Holk Or. "You'd better keep your mind on John Dark's orders."

Kenniston made a warning gesture. "Cut it! Here comes Murdock."

Hugh Murdock came straight along the deck toward them, and his sober, clean-cut young face wore a puzzled look as he halted before them.

"Kenniston, there's something about this I can't understand," he declared.

"Yes? What's that?" returned Kenniston guardedly.

He was very much on the alert. Murdock was not a heedless, gullible youngster like the others. He was, Kenniston had learned, an already important official in the Loring Radium company.

From the chaffing the others gave Murdock, it was evident that the young business man had joined the party only because he was in love with Gloria. There was something likeable about the dogged devotion of the sober young man. His very obvious determination to protect Gloria's safety, and his intelligence, made him dangerous in Kenniston's eyes.

"I was down in the hold looking over the equipment you loaded," Hugh Murdock was saying. "You know, the stuff we're to use to dig out the wreck of Dark's ship. And I can't understand it—there's no digging machinery, but simply a lot of cyclotrons, rocket-tubes and spare plates."

Kenniston smiled to cover the alarm he felt. "Don't worry, Murdock, I loaded just the equipment we'll need. You'll see when we reach Vesta."

Murdock persisted. "But I still don't see how that stuff is going to help. It's more like ship-repair stores than anything else."

Kenniston lied hastily. "The cycs are for power-supply, and the rocket-tubes and plates are to build a heavy duty power-hoist to jack the wreck out of the mud. Holk Or and I have got that all figured out."

Murdock frowned as though still unconvinced, but dropped the subject. When he had gone off to join the others, Holk Or glared after him.

"That fellow's too smart for his own good," muttered the Jovian. "He's suspicious. Maybe I'd better see that he meets with an accident."

"No, let him alone," warned Kenniston. "If anything happened to him now, the others would want to turn back. And we're almost to Vesta now."

But worry remained as a shadow in the back of Kenniston's own mind. It still oppressed him hours later when the arbitrary ship's-time had brought the 'night.' Sitting down in the luxurious passenger-cabin over highballs with the others, he wondered where Hugh Murdock was.

The rest of Gloria's party were all here, listening with fascinated interest to Holk Or's colorful yarns of adventures on the wild asteroids. But Murdock was missing. Kenniston wondered worriedly if the fellow was looking over that equipment in the hold again.

A young Earth space-man—one of the Sunsprite's small crew—came into the cabin and approached Kenniston.

"Captain Walls' compliments, sir, and would you come up to the bridge? He'd like your advice about the course again."

"I'll go with you," Gloria said as Kenniston rose. "I like it up in the bridge best of any place on the ship."

As they climbed past the little telaudio transmitter-room, they saw Hugh Murdock standing in there by the operator. He smiled at Gloria.

"I've been trying to get some mes-

sages through to Earth, but it seems we're almost out of range," he said ruefully.

"Can't you ever forget business, Hugh?" the girl said exasperatedly. "You're about as adventurous as a fat radium-broker of fifty."

Kenniston, however, felt relieved that Murdock had apparently forgotten about the oddness of the equipment below. His spirits were lighter when they entered the glassite-enclosed bridge.

Captain Walls turned from where he stood beside Bray, the chief pilot. The plump, cheerful master touched his cap to Gloria Loring.

"Sorry to bother you again, Mr. Kenniston," he apologized. "But we're getting pretty near Vesta, and you know this devilish region of space better than I do. The charts are so vague they're useless."

Kenniston glanced at the instrument-panel with a practiced eye and then squinted at the void ahead. The Sunsprite was now throbbing steadily through a starry immensity whose hosts of glittering points of light would have made a bewildering panorama to laymen's eyes.

They seemed near none of those blazing sparks. Yet every few minutes, red lights blinked and buzzers sounded on the instrument panel. At each such warning of the meteorometers, the pilot glanced quickly at their direction-dials and then touched the rocket-throttles to change course slightly. The cruiser was threading a way through unseen but highly perilous swarms of rushing meteors and scores of thundering asteroids.

Vesta was now a bright, pale-green disk like a little moon. It was not directly ahead, but lay well to the left. The cruiser was following an indirect course that had been laid to detour it well around one of the bigger meteor-swarms that was spinning rapidly toward Mars.

"What about it, Mr. Kenniston—is it safe to turn toward Vesta now?" Captain Walls asked anxiously. "The chart doesn't show any more swarms that should be in this region now, by my calculations."

Kenniston snorted. "Charts are all made by planet-lubbers. There's a small swarm that tags after that big No. 480 mess we just detoured around. Let me have the 'scopes and I'll try to locate it."

Using the meteorscopes whose sensitive electromagnetic beams could probe far out through space, to be reflected by any matter, Kenniston searched carefully. He finally straightened from the task.

"It's all right—the tag-swarm is on the far side of No. 480," he reported. "It should be safe to blast straight toward Vesta now."

The captain's anxiety was only partly assuaged. "But when we reach the asteroid, what then? How do we get through the satellite-swarm around it?"

"I can pilot you through that," Kenniston assured him. "There's a periodic break in that swarm, due to gravitational perturbations of the spinning

meteor-moons. I know how to find it."

"Then I'll wake you up early tomorrow 'morning' before we reach Vesta," vowed Captain Walls. "I've no hankering to run that swarm myself."

"We'll be there in the morning?" exclaimed Gloria with eager delight. "How long then will it take us to find the pirate wreck?"

Kenniston uncomfortably evaded the question. "I don't know—it shouldn't take long. We can land in the jungle near the wreck."

His feeling of guilt was increased by her enthusiastic excitement. If she and the others only knew what the morrow was to bring them!

He did not feel like facing the rest of them now, and lingered on the dark deck when they went back down from the bridge. Gloria remained beside him instead of going on to the cabin.

She stood, with the starlight from the transparent deck-wall falling upon her youthful face as she looked up at him.

"You are a moody creature, you know," she told Kenniston lightly. "Sometimes you're almost human—then you get all dark and grim again."

Kenniston grinned despite himself. Her voice came in mock surprise. "Why, it can actually smile! I can't believe my eyes."

Her clear young face was provocatively close, the faint perfume of her dark hair in his nostrils. He knew that she was deliberately flirting with him, perhaps mostly out of curiosity.

She expected him to kiss her, he knew. Damn it, he would kiss her! He did so, half ironically. But the ironic amusement faded out of his mind somehow at the oddly shy contact of her soft lips.

"Why, you're just a kid," he muttered. "A little kid masquerading as a bored, sophisticated young lady."

Gloria stiffened with anger. "Don't be silly! I've kissed men before. I just wanted to find out what you were really like."

"Well, what did you find out?"

Her voice softened. "I found out that you're not as grim as you look. I think you're just lonely."

The truth of that made Kenniston wince. Yes, he was lonely enough, he thought somberly. All his old spacemates, passing one by one—

"Don't you have anyone?" Gloria was asking him wonderingly.

"No family, except my kid brother Ricky," he answered heavily. "And most of my old space-partners are either dead or else worse—lying in the grip of gravitation-paralysis."

Memory of those old partners re-established Kenniston's wavering resolution. He mustn't let them down! He must go through with delivering this cruiser's cargo to John Dark, no matter what the consequences.

He thrust the girl almost roughly from him. "It's getting late. You'd better turn in like the others."

But later, in his bunk in the little cabin he shared with Holk Or, Kenniston found memory of Gloria a barrier to sleep. The shy touch of her lips refused to be forgotten. What would she think of him by tomorrow?

He slept, finally. When he awakened, it was to realization that someone had just sharply spoken his name. He knew drowsily it was 'morning' and thought at first that Captain Walls had sent someone to awaken him.

Then he stiffened as he saw who had awakened him. It was Hugh Murdock. The young businessman's sober face was grim now, and he stood in the doorway of the cabin with a heavy atom-pistol in his hand.

"Get up and dress, Kenniston," Murdock said sternly. "And wake up your fellow-pirate, too. If you make a wrong move I'll kill you both."

CHAPTER III

Through the Meteor-Moons

enniston went cold with dismay. He told himself numbly that it was impossible Hugh Murdock could have discovered the truth. But the grim expression on Murdock's face and the naked hate in his eyes were explainable on no other grounds.

The young businessman's finger was tense on the trigger of the atom-pistol. Resistance would be senseless. Mechanically, Kenniston slipped from his bunk and threw on his slacks and space-jacket. Holk Or was doing the same, the big Jovian's battered green face almost ludicrous in astonishment.

"Now perhaps you'll tell us what this means," Kenniston said harshly, his mind racing. "Have you lost your senses?"

"I've just come to them, Kenniston," rapped Murdock. "What fools we all were, not to guess that you two belong to Dark's pirates!"

Kenniston's lips tightened. It was clear now that Murdock had actually discovered something. From Holk Or came an angry roar.

"Devils of Pluto, I'm no pirate!" the big Jovian lied magnificently. "Whatever gave you this crazy idea?"

Murdock's hard face did not relax. He waved the atom-pistol. "Go into the main cabin," he ordered. "Walk ahead of me."

Helplessly, Kenniston and Holk Or obeyed. His mind was desperate as he shouldered down the corridor. The throbbing of the rockets told him the Sunsprite was still forging through the void. They must be very near Vesta by now—and now this had to happen!

The others had been awakened by the uproar and streamed into the main cabin after Murdock and his two prisoners. Kenniston glimpsed Gloria, slim in a silken negligee, her dark eyes round with amazement.

"Hugh, have you gone crazy?" she exclaimed stupefiedly.

Murdock answered without looking toward her. "I've found out the truth, Gloria. These men belong to John Dark's crew. They were taking us into a trap."

"Holy smoke!" gasped Robbie Boone, his jaw sagging as the chubby youth stared at Kenniston and Holk Or. "They're pirates?"

"I think you must be losing your mind!" Gloria stormed at Hugh Murdock. "This is ridiculous."

Holk Or yawned elaborately.

"Space-sickness hits people in queer ways, Miss Loring," the Jovian told Gloria confidentially. "Some it just makes sick, but others it makes delirious."

"I'm not delirious, and you two know it," Murdock retorted grimly. He spoke to Gloria and the others, without taking his eyes or the muzzle of his pistol off his two captives.

"I thought from the first that this Kenniston's story of finding the wreck of Dark's ship on Vesta was a thin one," Murdock declared. "And yesterday my suspicions were increased when I went down and looked over the cargo of equipment they brought. It's not equipment to dig out a buried wreck. It's equipment to repair a damaged ship—John Dark's ship!

"Suspecting that, last 'night' I sent a telaudiogram to Patrol headquarters at Earth. I gave full descriptions of Kenniston and this Jovian and inquired if they had criminal records. An answer came through an hour ago. This fellow Holk Or has a record of criminal piracy as long as your arm, and was definitely known to be one of John Dark's crew!"

There was an incredulous gasp from the others. Murdock still grimly watched Kenniston and the Jovian as he concluded.

"The Patrol hasn't yet sent through Kenniston's record, but it's obvious enough that he's one of Dark's men too, and that his story that he and the Jovian are meteor-miners is a flat lie."

"I can't understand this," muttered young Arthur Lanning, staring. "If they're Dark's men, why should they induce us to go to Vesta?"

"Can't you see?" said Hugh Murdock. "John Dark's ship did crash on Vesta after being wrecked—that must be true enough. But Dark and his pirates weren't dead as the Patrol thought. They had to have machines and material to repair their ship. So Dark sent these two men to Mars for the materials. The two couldn't get a ship there any other way, so they made use of our cruiser by selling us that treasure yarn!"

enniston winced. He knew now that he had underestimated Murdock, who had put together the evidence quickly when his suspicions were roused.

Gloria Loring, looking at Kenniston with wide dark eyes, saw the change in his expression. Into her white face came an incredulous loathing.

"Then it's true," she whispered. "You did that—you deliberately planned to lead us all into capture?"

"Aw, you're all space-struck," growled Holk Or, bluffing to the last.

Murdock spoke over his shoulder. "Call Captain Walls, Robbie."

"No need to—here he comes now!" yelped the excited youth.

Captain Walls, entering the cabin in urgent haste, had eyes only for Kenniston in the first moment.

"Ah, there you are, Mr. Kenniston!" the captain exclaimed relievedly. "I was just coming for you. We've reached Vesta! I've ordered the pilot to slow down, for I want you to pilot us through the swarm—"

The captain's voice trailed off. His

eyes bulged as for the first time he perceived that Murdock was covering the two men with a gun.

"We're not going in to Vesta, captain," rapped Murdock. "John Dark and his pirates are on the asteroid—alive!"

Captain Walls' plump face went waxy as he heard the name of the most dreaded corsair of the System.

"Dark—living?" he stuttered. "Good God, you must be joking!"

Mrs. Milsom, her dumpy figure shivering and her teeth chattering with terror, pointed a finger at Kenniston and the Jovian.

"They're two of the pirates!" she shrilled. "They might have murdered us all in our beds! I knew this would happen when we left Earth—"

Kenniston's mind was seething with despair as he stood there with hands upraised. His whole desperate plan was ruined at this last moment.

He wouldn't let it be ruined! He would get this cargo of machines and materials to John Dark if it meant his life!

"Turn back at once toward Mars, captain," Gloria was saying quietly to the stunned officer. Her face was still very pale.

Kenniston, standing tense, had had an idea. A desperate chance to make a break, in the face of Murdock's atom-gun.

The captain had said that he had just ordered the pilot to slow down the Sunsprite. In a moment would come the shock of the braking rocket-tubes firing from the bows—

That shock came an instant after the wild expedient flashed across Kenniston's mind. It was only a jarring vibration through the fabric of the ship, for the pilot knew his business.

It staggered them all on their feet, for just a moment. But Kenniston had been waiting for that moment. As Hugh Murdock moved his gun-arm involuntarily to balance himself, Kenniston lunged forward.

"The bridge, Holk!" he yelled as he hurled himself.

Kenniston's shoulder hit the captain and sent him caroming into Murdock. The two men sprawled on the floor.

Holk Or, with instant understanding, already had the door of the cabin open. They plunged out into the corridor together.

"Our only chance is to make the bridge and grab the controls!" Kenniston cried as they raced down the corridor. "We can keep them long enough to land on Vesta—"

Hiss—flash! The crackling blast of the atom-gun tore into the lower steps of the ladder up which he and the Jovian frantically climbed. Murdock was running after them as he fired, and there were shouts of alarm.

Kenniston and Holk Or burst into the glassite-walled bridge. Bray, the pilot, turned for a startled moment from his rocket-throttles.

Beyond the pilot, the transparent front wall framed a square of black space in which bulked the monstrous sphere of the nearby asteroid.

The World with a Thousand Moons! It loomed up only a few hundred miles

away, a big, pale-green sphere encircled by the vast globular swarm of hundreds on hundreds of gleaming little meteor-satellites.

"Why—what—" stammered the pilot, bewildered.

Kenniston's fist caught his chin, and the man sagged to the floor.

"Bar the door, Holk!" yelled Kenniston as he leaped toward the rocket-throttles.

"Hell, there's only a catch!" swore the Jovian. He braced his brawny shoulders against the metal door. "I can hold it a little while."

enniston's hands were flashing over the throttles. The Sunsprite was moving at reduced speed toward the meteor-enclosed asteroid.

The cruiser shook to the bursting roar of power, as he opened up all the tail rockets. It plunged visibly faster toward the deadly swarm around Vesta, picking up speed by the minute.

Rocking, creaking, quivering to the dangerous rate of acceleration Kenniston was maintaining, the little ship rushed ahead. But now there was loud hammering at the bridge-room door.

"Open up or we'll burn that door down!" came Captain Walls' yell.

Kenniston didn't turn. Hunched over the throttles, peering tensely ahead, he was tautly estimating speed and direction. His eyes searched frantically for the periodic break in the outer meteors.

There was a muffled crackling and the smell of scorched metal flooded the bridge-room. A hoarse exclamation of pain came from Holk Or.

"They got my arm through the door, damn them!" cursed the Jovian. "Hurry, Kenniston!"

Kenniston was driving the Sunsprite full speed toward the whirling cloud of meteors around the asteroid. He had spotted the break in the cloud, the periodic opening caused by the gravitational influence of another nearby asteroid.

It was not a real opening. It was merely a small area in the swarm where the rushing meteors were not so thick, and where a ship had a chance to worm through by careful piloting.

Kenniston only remotely heard the struggle that Holk Or was putting up to hold the door against the hammering crowd outside. His mind was wholly intent on the desperately ticklish piloting at hand.

He cut speed and eased the Sunsprite down into that thinner area of the meteor-swarm. Space around them now seemed buzzing with rushing, brilliant little moons.

The meteorometers had gone crazy, blinking and buzzing unceasing warning, their needles bobbing all over the direction-dials. Instruments were useless here—he had to work by sight alone. He eased the cruiser lower through the swarm, his fingers flashing over the throttles, using quick bursts of the rockets to veer aside from the bright, rushing meteors.

"Hurry!" yelled Holk Or hoarsely again, over the tumult. "I can't—hold them out much longer—"

Down and down went the Sunsprite through the maze of meteor-moons, twisting, turning, dropping ever lower toward the green asteroid.

A last gasping shout from Holk Or, and the door crashed off its burned-through hinges. Kenniston, unable to turn from the life-or-death business of threading the swarm, heard the Jovian fighting furiously.

Next moment a hand gripped Kenniston's shoulder and tore him away from the controls. It was Murdock, his eyes blazing, his gun raised.

"Raise your hands or I'll kill you, Kenniston!" he cried.

"Let me go!" yelled Kenniston, struggling to get back to the throttles. "You fool!"

He had just glimpsed the jagged moonlet rushing obliquely toward them from the left, bulking suddenly big and monstrous.

Crash! The shock flung them from their feet, and the Sunsprite gyrated crazily in space. There was a blood-chilling shriek of outrushing air from the fore part of the ship, and the slam-slam-slam of the automatic air-doors closing, down there.

The cruiser's whole bows had been crushed in by the glancing blow of the meteor. Now, ironically, the ship was falling clear of the meteor-swarm for Kenniston's piloting had almost won through it before the impact. But the Sunsprite was falling helplessly, turning over and over as it plunged down toward the green surface of the jungled asteroid.

"By God, we're struck!" came Captain Walls' thin yell.

"This is your fault!" Murdock blazed at Kenniston. "You damned pirates will die for this!"

"Let me at those controls or we'll all die together in five minutes!" Kenniston cried. "We'll crash to smithereens unless I can make a tail-tube landing—"

Heedless of Murdock's gun, he jumped to the controls. His hands flew over the throttles, firing desperate quick bursts of the tail rocket-tubes to bring them out of the spin in which they were falling.

The brake-rockets in the bow were gone. The ship was crippled, almost impossible to handle. And the dark green jungles of Vesta's surface were rushing upward with appalling speed.

Kenniston's frantic efforts brought the Sunsprite out of the spin. By firing the lateral rockets, he kept it falling tail-downward.

"We're goners!" yelled someone in the stricken ship. "We're going to crash!"

Air was screaming outside the plummeting ship. Kenniston, his hands superhumanly tense on the throttles, mechanically estimated their distance from the uprushing green jungles.

He glimpsed a little black lake in the jungle, and near it the big circle of an electrified stockade. He recognized it—John Dark's camp!

Then, a thousand feet above the jungle, Kenniston's hands jerked open the throttles. The tail rockets spouted fire downward.

Sickening shock of the sudden check almost hurled him away from the controls. His hands jabbed the throttles in and out with lightning rapidity, checking their further fall with one quick burst after another.

A sound of rending branches—a staggering sidewise shock that flung him from his feet. A jarring thump, then silence. They had landed.

CHAPTER IV

The Vestans

Kenniston picked himself up groggily. The others in the bridge had been thrown against walls or floor by the shock, but seemed no more than bruised. Holk Or was nursing his burned arm. But Hugh Murdock, staggering in a corner, still held his atom-pistol trained on Kenniston and the Jovian.

"My God, what a landing!" exclaimed Captain Walls, his plump face still white. "I thought we were done for."

"Maybe we still are," Murdock said grimly. He said savagely to Kenniston, "You think you've won, don't you? Because you've managed to crash us on this asteroid where your pirate boss is waiting?"

"Listen, Murdock—," Kenniston began desperately.

"Keep your hands up or I'll kill you both!" blazed Murdock. "March down to the main cabin."

Kenniston and the Jovian obeyed. The Sunsprite was lying sharply canted on its side, and it was difficult to scramble down through the tilted passageways and decks to the big main cabin.

The cabin was a scene of confusion, for it was impossible to stand upright on its tilted floor. Young Arthur Lanning had been stunned, and Gloria Loring and the scared blonde girl, Alice Krim, were bathing his bruised forehead. Robbie Boone was peering wildly through a porthole at the sunlit tangle of green jungle outside. From Mrs. Milsom came a shrill, steady wail of terror.

"Stop that screeching," Murdock told the dumpy dowager brutally. "You're not hurt. Gloria, are you others all right?"

Gloria raised her white face from her task. "Only bruised, Hugh."

She did not look at Kenniston or the big Jovian as she spoke.

Robbie Boone's teeth were chattering. "Murdock, what are we going to do? We're wrecked, on this hellish jungle asteroid—"

Murdock paid the frightened, chubby youth no attention. Captain Walls, Bray, and four of the crew were entering the cabin. The captain and pilot had belted on atom-pistols.

Captain Walls' plump face was paler. "Two of the crew were killed and our telaudio wrecked by that meteor," he reported. He glared at Kenniston. "You damned pirate! You're responsible for this!"

"If you hadn't dragged me away from the controls, the cruiser wouldn't have been struck," Kenniston denied. "And I'm not a pirate—"

Murdock interrupted. "We'll settle

with those two later," he told the enraged captain. "Right now, we'll have to get out of the ship. We can't stay in here until we get it righted on an even keel."

Holk Or rumbled a warning. "Better be careful about going outside. Those cursed Vestans are thick in these jungles."

"I'll have no advice from you two pirates!" flamed the captain. "Bray, you and Thorpe keep your guns on them every minute."

The heavy main space-door was opened. Pale sunlight and warm, steamy air laden with rank scents of strange vegetation drifted in. Outside lay a raw clearing the falling ship had crushed out of the jungle.

Captain Walls supervised as they all donned lead-soled weight-shoes to compensate for the weaker gravity. Then they emerged, young Lanning being supported by Murdock and Robbie. Kenniston and the Jovian were last to emerge, under the watchful guns of their guards.

The crew and passengers were looking around with wonder and revulsion. The silvery bulk of the Sunsprite lay awkwardly heeled on its side. The symmetrical torpedo shape of the cruiser was now badly marred by the crumpled condition of its bow.

All around them in the thin sunlight rose slender trees whose enormous green leaves grew directly from the trunks. This grotesque forest was made more dense by festoons of writhing "snake-vines," weird rootless creepers which crawled like plant-serpents from one tree to another. Each stir of wind brought white spore-dust down in a shower from the trees.

The few living creatures of this forbidding landscape were equally alien. Big white meteor-rats scurried on their eight legs through the brush. Phosphorescent flame-birds shot through the upper fronds like streaks of fire. In the pale sky overhead, there were ceaseless gleams and flashes of light as the spinning meteor-swarm reflected the sunlight.

"What a horrible place!" shrilled Mrs. Milsom. "We'll all die here—we'll never get back to Earth. I knew this would happen!"

"This is certainly a mean spot to be cast away," muttered Captain Walls. "God knows what queer creatures inhabit it, not to speak of the mysterious Vestans everybody talks about. And John Dark and his crew are somewhere here. And the telaudio wrecked, so we can't call for help."

Kenniston realized that none of the others had glimpsed Dark's camp as they fell. They didn't know the pirate encampment was only a few miles away in the jungle.

"What are we going to do, captain?" Gloria was asking, her face still pale but her voice quite steady. "Can we get away?"

Captain Walls looked hopeless. "We can't take off with the whole bow of the Sunsprite crushed in."

"We can repair it, can't we?" Hugh Murdock suggested. "Remember, in the hold is the cargo of machinery and re-

pair-materials that Kenniston was bringing to repair Dark's ship. Can't we use that equipment?"

The captain looked more hopeful. "Maybe we can. Bray and the crew and I ought to be able to do an emergency job of patching the bow and installing new rocket-tubes there. But we'll have to work fast to get away before Dark's outfit learns we're here."

He pointed vindicatively at Kenniston. "Better lock up that fellow and his partner to make sure he doesn't signal somehow to his fellow-pirates."

Kenniston tried again to explain. "Will you all listen to me? I tell you, I'm no pirate!"

Murdock eyed him sternly. "Do you deny that John Dark sent you to Mars for repair-equipment, and that you told us that lying treasure-story to get the equipment here in our ship?"

"No, I don't deny that," Kenniston admitted. "But I'm not one of John Dark's crew—I never was! I was a prisoner on his ship, captured by the pirates before they themselves were attacked by the Patrol."

"Do you expect us to believe that?" Murdock said incredulously.

"It's true!" Kenniston insisted. "My kid brother Ricky and I were captured by John Dark's outfit several weeks ago. We were prisoners on his ship when it was wrecked by the Patrol. After the wreck drifted onto Vesta here, Dark wanted to send someone to Mars for repair-equipment. He wouldn't send one of his own men in charge, for fear the man would double-cross him and never come back.

"So he sent me, his prisoner, on that errand. Holk Or came along to help me navigate a ship back. And I had to obey Dark and get the equipment back here at any cost. For Dark kept my brother Ricky prisoner here with him, and told me that if I didn't bring back that equipment, Ricky would be shot!"

Holk Or spoke up. "It's true, what Kenniston's telling you," rumbled the Jovian. "Me, I'm one of Dark's pirates and I don't care a curse who knows it. But Kenniston did this only to save his brother."

"I don't believe it," said Captain Walls flatly. "It's another of the smooth lies this fellow Kenniston makes up so easily."

Gloria spoke to Kenniston, her dark eyes still accusing. "If what you say is true and you're not a pirate, then you brought all of us into this danger simply to save your own brother?"

Kenniston looked at her miserably. "Yes, I did. I was willing to lead you all into capture to save Ricky. But I had a reason—"

"Sure, you had a reason," Murdock said bitterly. "What did the safety of strangers like us mean to you, compared to your precious brother?"

Captain Walls motioned Kenniston and Holk Or angrily toward the ship. "Bray, take them in and lock them under guard in a cabin," he said.

Holk Or suddenly yelled. "Look out! There's a Vestan!"

Kenniston, his blood chilling with alarm, glanced where the Jovian

pointed. At the west edge of the clearing, a small animal had suddenly emerged from the dense green jungle.

It was a six-legged, striped, catlike beast, not unordinary as interplanetary animals go. But its head looked queer, seeming to have a bulbous gray mass attached behind its ears.

Captain Walls uttered a scoffing exclamation. "That's only an ordinary asteroid-cat."

"That is a Vestan!" Kenniston cried. "Shoot at its head—"

His warning was too late. The catlike beast had launched itself in a spring toward their group.

As its striped body shot through the air, Walls triggered his atom-pistol. The crackling blast of force tore into the body of the charging asteroid-cat, and the beast fell heavily a few yards away.

But as it fell, the small gray mass upon its neck suddenly detached itself from the dead animal and scuttled swiftly forward. It moved with blurring speed toward Bray, the nearest to it of the group.

The little gray creature was no bigger than a man's clenched fists together. It was a gray, wrinkled featureless thing, except for pinpoint eyes and the tiny clawlike legs upon which it scurried. It reached Bray and ran swiftly up his legs and back as he swore.

Kenniston, made reckless of danger by his horror, yelled and lunged toward the pilot. Bray was swearing and trying to slap at the gray thing running up his back. But the little creature had now reached his neck. Clinging there, it swiftly dug two tiny, needle-like antennae into the base of his neck.

"Hold him!" Kenniston shouted hoarsely. "The Vestan has got him!"

Bray had undergone a sudden metamorphosis as the gray creature dug its antennae into his neck. His face stiffened, became masklike.

The pilot turned and began to run stiffly toward the jungle. Kenniston's leap almost caught him, but Bray lashed out a fist that sent Kenniston sprawling.

"Don't let him get away!" Kenniston yelled, scrambling up.

But the others were too stricken by amazement and horror to interfere in time. Bray had already plunged into the jungle and was gone.

"My God, what happened?" Captain Walls exclaimed dazedly. "Bray went clean crazy!"

His gun was pointing at Kenniston and Holk Or as though he held them responsible for what had occurred.

"He didn't go crazy, but he's lost now," Kenniston said heavily. "That little gray creature was one of the Vestans."

"But what did it do to him? That thing wasn't big enough to harm anybody."

"That's all you know about it," said Holk Or ominously. "Those little Vestans are the most dangerous creatures in the System."

"The Vestans," Kenniston added dully, "are semi-intelligent parasites. The live by attaching themselves to and taking control of some other creature's body. They do it by jabbing in those tiny, needle-like antennae to contact the victim's nervous system. Thereafter, the

Vestan controls the victim's body absolutely. When the victim dies or is hurt, the Vestan simply detaches himself and fastens upon a new victim."

Horror was on the white faces of the others. Murdock gulped and asked, "Then Bray—"

"Bray is beyond saving now," Kenniston said. "The Vestan parasite will control his body till he dies. The Vestans always like to attach themselves to human beings—they know that a man's body is more versatile in its capabilities than an animal's."

Twilight was beginning to descend upon the little clearing in the jungle, for the sun had gone down during the last few minutes. In the gathering dusk, the jungle loomed dark and brooding about them.

Overhead, the sky of this World with a Thousand Moons was burgeoning into its full glory. The hundreds of meteor-moons that spun across the heavens were shining brighter and brighter in the deepening dusk.

Captain Walls broke the spell of horror and dread. "We'd better get back inside the ship for tonight," he said nervously. "We can't do anything about repairs until tomorrow, anyway. By then we'll have figured out some way to deal with those devilish creatures."

Murdock said bitterly to Kenniston, "Bray's end is your fault, Kenniston. You brought him and us and these women into this place, all for the sake of that brother of yours."

"He'll stand trial for that when we get back to Mars," the captain vowed. "Even if he wasn't one of Dark's crew originally, by helping them he's made himself a space-pirate, liable to execution."

Kenniston made no attempt to defend himself. He knew they wouldn't understand why he had sacrificed them for Ricky's sake, even if he told them.

He and Holk Or were locked in one of the little cabins, after it had been carefully searched. The crewman Thorpe was stationed as a guard outside their bolted door.

Holk Or, who had bandaged his burned arm, looked around the dark little cabin disgustedly. "This is a devil of a fix to get into!" swore the Jovian. "Here we've reached Vesta with the stuff, but can't let the chief know."

Kenniston asked him earnestly, "Holk, would John Dark really shoot Ricky if I didn't deliver the equipment? He said he would, but you know he needs Ricky."

Kenniston was clinging to this last shred of hope for his brother. John Dark and his pirates did need Ricky. For Ricky was a physician—Doctor Richard Kenniston of the Institute of Planetary Medicine.

That was why John Dark had spared the lives of the two brothers when he had captured them in the freighter in which they were returning to Earth from Saturn. Ordinarily, the pirate leader would have ruthlessly killed them as he killed all prisoners who were not rich enough to pay ransom.

But the fact that Ricky was a physician had saved them. The pirates

needed a doctor. They had kept the two brothers prisoner on their ship for that reason. Kenniston and Ricky had still been on the Falcon as prisoners, when the Patrol had finally caught up to it and wrecked it.

"Dark knows that Ricky is a fine doctor and he needs a doctor," Kenniston repeated hopefully, to the Jovian. "Surely he wouldn't be foolish enough to shoot Ricky, even if I don't deliver the equipment."

"Kenniston, don't fool yourself," warned Holk Or. "The chief said he'd shoot him if you weren't back with the stuff in two weeks, and shoot him he will. John Dark never breaks his word."

That assurance sank the iron deeper into Kenniston's tormented soul. If that was true, and he knew in his heart it was, Ricky would die two days from now unless he'd delivered the repair-equipment to Dark.

He mustn't let Ricky die! Too much depended on his young brother's life. He must save Ricky even if it did mean the capture of Gloria and the others by the pirates. Better that they be held for ransom, than for Ricky to be killed!

Kenniston got to his feet, rigid with decision. "Then we've got to get out of here," he muttered. "We've got to escape and take word to Dark that the equipment is here."

He continued quickly, "Holk, Dark's camp is only a few miles north of here. I spotted it as the Sunsprite fell."

Holk Or uttered an exclamation. "Why the devil didn't you tell me so! I figured it was on the other side of the asteroid, maybe, and that we'd never find it in the jungle even if we did get away."

"It still won't be easy for us," Kenniston warned. "The Vestans may get us in the jungle between here and Dark's camp. And anyway, how can we get out of this cabin?"

The big Jovian grinned. "That'll be easy. I'd have been out of here before now, only I was waiting for the ship to quiet down."

Kenniston stared. "That door is bolted. And there's no tool or weapon in the cabin. They didn't forget a thing when they searched it!"

Holk Or's grin deepened. "They forgot one thing. They forgot how strong a Jovian is on a little, weak-gravity asteroid like this!"

CHAPTER V

Night Attack

Kenniston caught desperately at the hope implied by the Jovian's words.

"What do you mean, Holk?"

"I mean that I'm a hundred times stronger on this little asteroid than I am on my own world, Jupiter. I can break the bolt of that door any time I want to."

"But there's an armed guard stationed outside it."

"I know, and that's where you come in, Kenniston. When I rip the door open, you be ready to jump the guard."

Kenniston considered swiftly. The chance of their getting out of the ship and safely through the jungles to the pirate camp, even if they escaped this

cabin, seemed a slim one. Yet it presented the only possibility of delivering the equipment in the hold to John Dark.

The bitter irony of it struck Kenniston, for the hundredth time. He, Lance Kenniston, honorable space-man for a dozen years, working desperately to aid the most notorious pirate in the void! Even drawing into danger the girl for whom he felt—

He shut Gloria out of his mind. He mustn't think of her now. He must think only of Ricky, and of what would be lost if Ricky died. He must risk everything, sacrifice everything, to prevent that loss.

"We might as well try it now," he told the Jovian in low tones. "The ship seems quiet."

"I'll do my best to make as little noise as possible," Holk Or muttered. "Are you ready?"

The Jovian's big hands grasped the knob of the door. Kenniston crouched a little behind him, every muscle tense.

Holk Or suddenly put all his gigantically magnified strength into a tremendous tug at the door. Its bolt snapped with a crack like that of a pistolshot, and it swung wide open.

The man on guard outside turned, startled, his hand darting to the atom-gun at his belt and his mouth open to yell. But Kenniston had launched himself like a human projectile as the door was torn open.

Kenniston's fist smashed the space-sailor's chin and the man sagged limp and unconscious with no chance to utter the cry on his lips. Hastily, Kenniston took his atom-pistol and eased him to the floor.

He and Holk Or listened tensely. The single sharp crack of the snapping bolt had apparently aroused no one. The ship was silent. All aboard were sleeping exhaustedly.

"Come on," Kenniston murmured tensely to the Jovian. "We've got to hurry to get to Dark's camp before night is over."

Holk Or chuckled. "The chief will welcome us with open arms when he learns we've got the equipment here for him."

Kenniston gripped the atom-pistol as they stole through the dark ship and out of the space-door. Outside, they paused in the darkness.

The scene was one of magic, unearthly beauty. The metal bulk of the cruiser and the towering jungle around the clearing were washed by brilliant silver light that fell from the wonderful night sky of this World with a Thousand Moons.

A thousand moons indeed seemed blazing in the canopied heavens overhead! The whole dark sky was crowded by the shining moonlets that rushed ceaselessly across the firmament with the spinning of the meteor-swarm of which they were part. It was like the glorious vista of a world seen in dreams.

But Kenniston was familiar with the unearthly spectacle. He led the way rapidly toward the northern edge of the jungle.

"We'll just have to plunge in and head north," he told the Jovian. "If we

reach that little lake, we can soon find Dark's camp."

They started into the dense jungle, a fairyland of silver beams sifting through the choking fronds. Something scurried close by.

"Kenniston, shoot!" cried Holk Or instantly.

Kenniston had already glimpsed the white beast scurrying toward them across a little patch of moonslight. It was one of the big meteor-rats. On its neck bunched one of the little gray masses—a Vestan.

The horror inspired by the hideous parasites tightened Kenniston's finger convulsively on the trigger of the atom-pistol. The crackling bolt of fire from the weapon ripped into the Vestan on the meteor-rat, and both parasite and animal victim were instantly a scorched, smoking heap.

"Hell, that's torn it!" cried the big Jovian. "We've roused the whole ship!"

Men awakened by the blast of the atom-gun were pouring out of the Sunsprite, rushing after the two escaped men. Kenniston heard Captain Walls shouting.

"They're in the jungle here! Spread out and surround them!" the officer was ordering.

Kenniston and the Jovian plunged forward, seeking to escape northward. But they had come up against an impenetrable abatis of brush.

Before they could find a way around it, they heard men crashing all around them. They were completely encircled.

"Kenniston, you and that Jovian walk back into the clearing with your hands raised or we'll blast every inch of the brush till we get you!" came the stentorian shout of the captain.

"The devil—they've got us boxed!" exclaimed Holk Or furiously. "We'll try to fight our way through."

"No!" Kenniston declared. "We couldn't make it anyway. And I'm not going to shoot innocent men."

Holk Or angrily grabbed for the atom-pistol, but Kenniston promptly threw it away. Not even in this last extremity could he bring himself to kill.

"You're a fool!" gritted the Jovian. "Now there's nothing for it but surrender."

With their hands raised, they walked out of the jungle into the brilliant silvery light of the clearing. Instantly they were surrounded by Captain Walls, Murdock and the other armed crew-men.

The girls and their scared chaperon, and young Lanning and Robbie Boone, were emerging in alarm from the Sunsprite. Kenniston did not look toward them.

Captain Walls' face was grim in the moonslight, as he and his men covered the two captured fugitives. "Kenniston, you and this Jovian were going to make your way to John Dark and tell him of our presence here, weren't you? You needn't deny it—it's plain enough."

"Sure we were!" exclaimed the angry Jovian. "We'd have made it, too, if a Vestan hadn't jumped us in the jungle."

"That would have meant capture of us all by Dark's pirates," said the cap-

tain grimly. "You two are a danger to us all, while you live. I'm going to remove that danger. As master of a space-ship, I have legal right to order summary execution of any space-pirates I capture. I'm going to order that now."

"You're going to kill them?" exclaimed Gloria. "Oh, no—you can't!"

"It's absolutely necessary, before they betray us to the pirates, Miss Loring," defended the captain. "They'd be sentenced to death by the courts if we took them back to Mars, anyway. But we daren't take a chance on keeping them prisoned that long."

"But just to shoot them down!" said Gloria. "I won't stand for that!"

Murdock took her by the arm. "It's space law, Gloria," he told her earnestly. "You'd better go back into the ship."

Kenniston stood silent in the moonslight, for he realized from the finality of Walls' voice that appeals would be utterly useless. There was no use trying again to explain why he'd been willing to betray them all to save Ricky. Even if they listened, they wouldn't understand.

He felt tired, crushed, old. He'd gone a long way in the last dozen years, but every mile of it had only led toward this ending. He was going to die here under the hurtling meteor-moons of Vesta, and that meant that Ricky and Ricky's dream were going to die soon too.

"I told you you were a fool to throw away that gun," Holk Or was muttering.

"You two march over there to the edge of the clearing," Captain Walls ordered grimly, gesturing with his gun. "Anything you want to say first, Kenniston?"

"Nothing that you would listen to or understand, you people," Kenniston answered dully. "No, I've got nothing to say."

A crackling voice came out of the dark jungle at that moment.

"I have something to say! Drop those guns, every man of you, and get your hands up!"

Walls spun around with an oath, levelling his atom-pistol. But out of the jungle crashed a streak of fire that hit the captain's arm and sent him reeling.

One of the girls screamed. Another of the Sunsprite's crew had tried to aim his weapon and had been cut down by a second bolt of atomic fire that had hit his leg.

"I don't want to kill you unless you force me to," came that crisp voice from the darkness. "You have ten seconds to drop the guns."

"That's the chief, Kenniston!" yelled Holk Or excitedly. "It's John Dark himself!"

The dreaded name of the pirate, a synonym for cold ruthlessness, reinforced the threat from the darkness.

Murdock let his weapon fall and shouted, "Drop the atom-guns, men! If we try to fight, the women will be hurt!"

The Sunsprite's men dropped their atom-pistols. Instantly out into the brilliant light from the jungle rushed a score of armed pirates. Martians, Earthmen, Venusians and others—this horde rep-

resented the criminal under-world of every planet in the System.

In a moment they had those in the clearing completely disarmed and lined up against the ship. All except Holk Or, who was loudly greeting his pirate comrades.

Kenniston saw John Dark coming across the moonslit clearing toward them. The notorious pirate was a tall, bulky Earthman, but he walked with the lightfootedness of a cat in his moonshoes. His black hair was bare, and in the silver light his black-browed, intelligent face was coldly calm as his eyes searched the row of prisoners.

"So you finally got here, Kenniston. What about the repair-equipment?" he asked sharply.

Kenniston nodded toward the Sunsprite. "It's in the hold. We got everything you listed."

"Good!" Dark approved. "We saw your ship crash-landing today, and started this way at once. We've been beating through the jungle, fighting off the damned Vestans, until we heard the uproar going on here. What happened? Who are these people?"

Kenniston explained briefly how he had induced Gloria Loring's party to come on a pretended treasure-hunt. He was careful to stress the wealth of the party, and John Dark reacted as he had expected.

"If they're that wealthy, their families can pay big ransoms. You've done very well, Kenniston."

"What about Ricky?" asked Kenniston tensely. "He's all right?"

"Sure he's all right—he's up at the camp," Dark answered.

Gloria said bitterly to Kenniston, "You can congratulate yourself. You've managed to save your brother."

John Dark addressed her. "Miss Loring, I presume you and your companions are willing to pay ransom for your crew also? I never take prisoners, unless they promise a good profit."

"Yes, of course we'll pay the ransom of the crew!" Gloria agreed hastily.

"Good!" said the pirate calmly. "You'll not find your captivity any more irksome than necessary."

Mrs. Milsom, the dumpy chaperon, was goggling at the notorious pirate in an extreme of terror. A sardonic gleam came into Dark's eyes as he glanced at her.

"You're a handsome wench," he told the plump dowager with mock admiration. "I've half a mind to keep you and let the ransom go."

"No, no!" shrieked the terrified woman.

Dark burst into a roar of laughter. "All right, my shrinking beauty, we'll accept ransom for you."

He turned and shot efficient orders to his subordinates, who by now had gathered behind him.

"Get that stuff out of the hold, rig up power-sledges, and start freighting it up to the camp. You'll have to cut a path through the jungle—use atom-blasters to burn one out."

One of the pirates, a hard-faced Martian, said uneasily, "That will make a racket that'll bring every Vestan on the

asteroid down on us."

"You can keep the Vestans off if you keep your eyes open," Dark retorted. "Get to work, now! We've got to get the stuff up there and repair the Falcon at once. I'll take these prisoners up to camp."

Kenniston was grouped with the other prisoners. With a strong escort of armed pirates guarding them, and Dark and Holk Or ahead, they started through the jungle toward the pirate camp.

CHAPTER VI

Asteroid Horror

The pirate encampment was a big clearing hacked from the jungle a mile west of the little lake. In this space lay the long, looming black mass of the most dreaded corsair ship ever to sail the void. The Falcon had been righted to even keel, but its crippled condition was evident in the fused, wrecked condition of its tail rocket-tubes.

The whole camp was enclosed and protected by a shimmering blue dome of electric force. This emanated from a heavy copper cable that completely encircled the clearing, and which drew its power from insulated cables that led into the ship to generators driven by the few cyclotrons still functioning. This protective electric wall had been set up at John Dark's orders to keep out the dreaded Vestans.

John Dark raised his voice as he and his men with their prisoners approached the shimmering wall of the camp.

"Kin Ibo! Drop the wall for us!"

They saw the hard-looking Martian who was Dark's second-in-command dive into the ship to turn off the power of the electric barrier. It died, and Dark's party entered the clearing. Then the electric wall sprang into being again behind them.

Kenniston looked swiftly around. There were a score more of the motley pirates here in the camp. Also, near the side of the looming black Falcon, were the small, rough log huts that Dark's men had constructed.

Dark's black eyes were triumphant as he told his Martian lieutenant, "Kenniston and Holk Or brought back the equipment all right, and also brought some people who'll bring big ransom. Their wrecked ship is a few miles south. You go down there with half the men here and help the others bring up the equipment."

Kin Ibo, looking a little apprehensively out at the jungle, obeyed. Dark motioned Kenniston and the other captives toward one of the huts by the big ship.

"That hut will be your quarters until we get the Falcon repaired," declared the pirate leader. "Any of you who try to leave it will be shot at sight. I hope you'll not be foolish enough to attempt escape."

"That's right, folks, you wouldn't have a chance," Holk Or told them earnestly. "Even if you could get out through the electric wall, the Vestans would get you. They're thick in the jungle around here."

They silently entered the hut. Its

broad open windows admitted enough of the dazzling moonslight to brighten its interior.

A dark, eager-looking young Earthman sprang up as they entered, and rushed to pump Kenniston's hand.

"Lance, you got back safely!" he exclaimed. "Thank the Lord—I've been worrying myself almost crazy about you."

"How about you, Ricky?" Kenniston asked his young brother anxiously. "You're all right?"

Ricky Kenniston nodded quickly. "Sure, I'm okay. But things haven't been so good here, Lance. The Vestans have got a half-dozen pirates who ventured outside the wall in the last few days. These creatures literally haunt the jungles around here now—I think they've been drawn here from all over the asteroid."

Ricky looked wonderingly at Gloria and the others who were entering the hut. "Lance, who are all these people? Are they prisoners of Dark too?"

"Yes, we're prisoners," Hugh Murdock told him bitterly, with a savage glance at Kenniston. "We're prisoners because your brother sacrificed us all to get back here and save your neck."

"Lance, you didn't do that?" Ricky exclaimed in distress.

"I had to, Ricky," Kenniston protested. "It meant your life if I didn't."

"Of course," Murdock agreed ironically. "What importance are we, compared to saving your young brother's life?"

Kenniston spoke slowly, to Murdock and Gloria and the others. "It wasn't merely Ricky's life at stake that made me sacrifice you all. It was more than that. I tried to tell you before, but you wouldn't listen."

Kenniston went across the hut and brought back the square black medicine-case of his young physician-brother. He opened it, and out of the vials and instruments inside he took a square bottle of milky fluid.

"This is what I sacrificed everything to save," Kenniston said simply.

They all stared. "What is it?" Gloria asked, puzzled.

"It's Ricky's discovery," Kenniston said. "It's a preventative and cure for gravitation-paralysis."

Captain Walls, himself an old-time space-man, was first of the group to appreciate the significance of the statement. The captain gasped.

"A preventative for gravitation-paralysis? Kenniston, are you sure?"

Kenniston nodded gravely. "Yes. Ricky had been working on the problem a long time, back in the Institute of Planetary Medicine. He thought he'd found a way to prevent gravitation-paralysis, the most awful scourge of all the outer System, the thing that's doomed so many space-men. But his formula required rare elements found only in the outer planets.

"Ricky and I," he continued, "went out there and secured those elements. He made up this formula, and tried it on a gravitation-paralysis case—a spaceman who's lain paralyzed for years. The formula was designed to strengthen the

human nervous system against the shock of varying gravitations, to re-establish an already damaged nerve-web. And it worked."

Kenniston's voice was husky as he concluded. "It worked, and that living log became a man again. The formula was a success. Ricky and I started back for Earth, where he intended to announce the discovery and arrange for its manufacture on a big scale. But, on the way back, Dark's pirates captured us."

Kenniston flung out his hand in a tortured gesture. "That's why I went to any lengths to save Ricky's life! It's because Ricky is the only person who knows the intricate formula of this serum. If he were to die, the secret of the cure would die with him. And that would mean that thousands on thousands more of spacemen would be stricken into living death by gravitation-paralysis in the future, just as so many thousands of old friends and shipmates of mine have been stricken in the past!"

Captain Walls was the first to speak. Quietly, the plump master of the Sunsprite extended his hand.

"Kenniston, will you shake hands with me? And will you forgive me for everything? You did absolutely right. I'm an old space-man and I know what gravitation-paralysis is."

Gloria's dark eyes were glimmering with tears. "If we'd only known," she murmured to Kenniston. "No one could blame you for sacrificing a lot of worthless idlers like us, for a thing like this."

"But you're going to be all right—all of you," Kenniston assured her. "John Dark will make you pay a big ransom, but you can afford that and you'll get back safely to Earth."

"Thank Heaven for that!" exclaimed Mrs. Milsom. "I can't understand all this scientific talk of yours, but I do know that that pirate chief means no good to me. Didn't you see the lustful looks he gave me?"

The laugh that greeted this lessened the tension. Kenniston turned as Ricky plucked at his arm.

"What about ourselves, Lance?" Ricky asked quietly. "Dark still won't let us go, you know. He still needs me as a doctor."

Hugh Murdock stepped forward. "Dark would let you both go, for a big enough ransom. I'd like to pay it for you."

The handsomeness of Murdock's gesture moved Kenniston. He was only able to mutter his thanks.

While Ricky was treating Captain Walls' burned arm, the officer kept looking fascinatedly at that square bottle of milky fluid.

He said hesitantly, "I've a son—back on Earth. For five years he's lain in a cot from the gravitation-paralysis that hit him out on Jupiter. Do you suppose—"

Ricky nodded. "Yes, Captain. I'm sure that we can cure him, now."

There was an uproar out in the clearing. Kenniston went to the door and looked out.

The electric wall had temporarily been dropped, and Kin Ibo and the main body of the pirates were hastily enter-

ing the camp with their improvised power-sledges that bore heavy loads of machinery and materials.

Kenniston heard Kin Ibo reporting shrilly to John Dark, "We lost two men to the Vestans on the way here—and nearly lost two more! All this activity has drawn them from all over the asteroid! Look at that!"

Outside the electric wall, which had been hastily re-raised, could be glimpsed the shapes of lurking asteroidal animals. Meteor-rats, big striped cats, flame-birds—and every one of those lurking animals bore attached to its neck one of the little gray Vestan parasites.

John Dark was saying harshly, "We've got to have the rest of those materials to repair the Falcon."

"I tell you, it'd be suicide to try another trip through those jungles!" expostulated the Martian. "Those Vestans are devils!"

"Bah, you Martians are all alike—no good when your superstitions get aroused," snorted Dark contemptuously. "I'll take the men down myself. Come on, men—unload those sledges and we'll go back to the wreck."

His indomitable personality drove the scared, unwilling pirates into the task. Again the electric wall was faded out for a moment to let them out.

When they returned some time toward morning, Kenniston heard the crash of atom-guns heralding their approach. And when the wall was momentarily dropped, John Dark and his men stumbled into the camp with their loaded sledges in sweating haste.

"Turn on the wall again—quick!" bellowed Dark's bull voice. "The jungle's swarming with the gray devils now—they got five of us on the way back!"

Ricky, looking over Kenniston's shoulder, spoke appalledly. "Good God, Lance—look at them! I didn't know there were so many Vestans!"

Outside the barrier of shimmering electricity, scores of animals and birds dominated by the dreaded little gray parasitical creatures were now swarming. And their number seemed growing every minute.

"All this activity of the night has drawn the Vestans from far and wide," Kenniston muttered. "I don't like it. If that electric wall should fail, the creatures would be in on us in a moment."

Dark himself seemed to feel something of the same apprehension, for he was shouting urgent orders. "Hook up those atomic welders, and start putting the new plates into the Falcon's tail. Kin Ibo, have your gang fit in the new rocket-tubes. I'll see to installing the new cycs. If we work, we can get the job done by tomorrow night and get out of here."

Through the day, the pirates toiled with an energy that showed their earnest desire to leave the asteroid. That desire was reinforced by the ever-larger number of Vestans that now swarmed outside the wall.

There were literally hundreds of the gray parasites now outside the barrier. To have tried going outside the wall now

would have been sheer suicide. The creatures were apparently driven by unholy eagerness to possess themselves of human bodies.

Gloria, looking out with Kenniston, shuddered deeply. "This horrible world! It's like a nightmare."

"We'll soon be away from it," Kenniston reassured. "See, they've almost finished repairing the Falcon."

The urgent toil of the pirates was showing results. By the time night came again, and the meteor-moonlets blazed forth with magic beauty in the dark heavens, the task of repair was almost done.

Kenniston and his companions had not ventured forth from the hut. Pirates were everywhere in the clearing, and all had heard John Dark's strict order to blast down the captives if they left their prison.

But from the hut, Kenniston and the others could see that the horde of Vestan-dominated animals around the camp had further increased. With ghastly avidity, they kept circling the shimmering, electric wall.

Kenniston turned in alarm at a ripping sound from the back of the log hut. Two of the logs were being torn out bodily. The battered green face and giant shoulders of Holk Or came through the opening.

"Kenniston, I came in this way because I didn't dare let Dark see me talking to you!" the Jovian exclaimed. His face was urgent in expression. "I've found out that Dark doesn't mean to let your friends here get away from Vesta alive."

"What?" exclaimed Kenniston. "That's impossible! Dark said he was going to hold Gloria and the others for ransom."

Holk Or nodded hastily. "I know, and he meant it, then. But since then, he's found out something that's changed his plans. He found it out from me—like a big fool, I told him everything when he questioned me."

The Jovian continued rapidly. "I told him that Murdock had sent that telaudio message back to Patrol headquarters, asking about my record. Now Dark figures that the Patrol will come out here to find out if that message meant that some of John Dark's outfit had actually escaped.

"Dark wants the Patrol to keep thinking that he and his outfit were destroyed—so he can slip out to Pluto and prepare a new base. So Dark, when he leaves here, is going to drop Miss Loring and her friends by the wrecked Sunsprite, so the Patrol will find 'em dead by the wreck and will believe their cruiser crashed accidentally. That way, they won't go on searching as they would if Miss Loring's party was all missing. And Dark will have a chance to get out to Pluto without an alarm going out."

Kenniston was suspicious. "Why do you tell us this, Holk? You're one of the pirates yourself."

"I know, but I'm afraid Dark means to drop me with the others by the Sunsprite!" Holk Or exclaimed. "He didn't say so, but I believe he figures on doing it so that the telaudio inquiry

about me would be explained when I was found dead with the others by the wreck."

Murdock said swiftly, "The Jovian's right, Kenniston. All this is just what Dark would do, to hide his trail, now that he knows my telaudio message may have aroused the Patrol's suspicion."

Holk Or said emphatically, "I'm with you if you can figure out any way to take the Falcon, Kenniston!"

Kenniston paced to and fro. His whole mind was suddenly in a wild turmoil of stark fears. This meant death for Gloria and the others, and the ultimate responsibility for that death would be his.

"There is one possible chance for us to take the Falcon," he muttered finally. "But my God, it seems like an insane idea—"

"Wait a minute!" Captain Walls interrupted. "Dark won't drop you and your brother to die, Kenniston. He still needs your brother as a physician. You two will be safe even if we are killed."

"What of that? I can't let Gloria and the rest of you be murdered! I was willing to sacrifice you when I thought it was only a question of your being held for ransom, but this changes everything," Kenniston said wildly.

"It doesn't change anything," the captain said firmly. "Your duty is to keep your brother alive at all costs, to save that formula that means life and hope for thousands of gravitation-paralysis victims like my son."

"You mean—I should let you all be killed so Ricky and I can be saved?" Kenniston cried. "I'm damned if I will!"

"We'll never do that!" Ricky Kenniston agreed warmly. "No formula in the world is worth that."

"This formula is," Gloria said earnestly to Kenniston. "The captain is right."

"I won't do it," Kenniston repeated. "I have an idea by which we might be able to take the Falcon. We're going to try it."

"Be reasonable, Kenniston," pleaded Hugh Murdock. "None of us except Holk Or has a weapon. What chance would we have against half a hundred armed pirates?"

Kenniston looked at his brother. "Ricky, your formula strengthens the nervous system against any form of shock or damage, doesn't it? You said it did it by sheathing the nerves themselves with an impenetrable coating."

Ricky nodded puzzledly. "Yes, that's the principle. But how is that going to help us?"

"The Vestans," Kenniston reminded, "seize control of their victims by inserting those tiny needle antennae of theirs into the victim's nerve-system to establish contact. Wouldn't your formula insulate the nerves against such contact? Wouldn't it make a man immune to Vestan attack?"

"Why, it would!" Ricky declared wonderingly. "I never thought of it, yet it's entirely logical."

"Then," Kenniston said swiftly, "I want you to give every one of us, including yourself, an injection of the formula right now."

The driving purpose in his voice brushed aside all their bewildered questions and objections. Hastily, Ricky prepared his hypodermics and rapidly made an injection of the milky fluid into the big nerve-centers in the neck of each of them. Kenniston did the same for Ricky himself.

"We should be immune now to Vestan attack," Kenniston said prayerfully.

"But what good's that going to do us?" Holk Or demanded. "Are you figuring to try an escape into the jungle?"

"No, I'm figuring on taking the Falcon—by using the Vestans," Kenniston replied. "Holk, can you get into the ship and turn off the power that keeps the electric wall going? Can you drop the wall?"

The Jovian's jaw dropped. "Why, sure, I could do that, but if I did, all those hordes of Vestans outside the wall will burst in here—"

He stopped, his eyes bulging. "Good God, then that's your plan? To let the Vestans in?"

"That's it," Kenniston said tightly, his face grim. "To let the Vestans in on the pirates. That'll give us a chance to take the ship—if the formula really makes us immune to the Vestans."

The terrible nature of the proposal stunned them all. But in a moment a flame of purpose lit in the Jovian's eyes.

"I'll do it!" he swore. "It's better than waiting for Dark to kill me like he's planning. You be ready!"

The Jovian slipped out of the opening in the back of the hut. They saw him presently, casually approaching the door of the Falcon.

John Dark stood, a tall, dominant figure in the moonslight, barking orders to the scores of pirates who were bolting in the last of the new rocket-tubes. Kenniston's eyes swung toward the shimmering electric wall, and the horde of Vestan-dominated animals outside it.

The wall suddenly died! And as the electric barrier vanished, into the clearing came rushing the swarm of asteroidal animals.

"The wall's down!" John Dark yelled, his atom-gun leaping into his hand. "Get back into the ship—get back—"

The crash of his atom-gun drowned his own shout. Other pirates were firing wildly at the hideous creatures assailing them.

For the little gray Vestans had detached themselves from their animal victims and were swarming upon the pirates, clambering with blurring speed up their legs and backs, sinking into their necks the tiny antennae.

Kenniston glimpsed John Dark, with a hideous little gray bunch now fastened to the back of his neck, drop his gun and stalk stiffly away toward the jungle. His face was an unhuman, lifeless mask—he was a human automaton, dominated utterly by the alien creature.

"Come on!" Kenniston yelled to his friends. "Now's our chance to get into the ship!"

They plunged out of the hut into the gruesome melee. Screaming pirates were now running into the jungle in vain

effort to escape the hordes of Vestans. More than half the corsairs were now overcome.

Kenniston heard a scream from Gloria as they ran, felt a swift scurrying up his back, then the needle-like stab of antennae sinking into his neck.

But the parasitic creature did not overpower his will! He reached around, grasped and tore loose the hideous little thing, and with strong revulsion flung it to the ground.

"Your formula works, Ricky—we're immune to them!" he gasped. "But hurry!"

Other Vestans were clambering up on them like ghastly gray spiders as they ran, but were powerless to overcome them. They tore away the creatures and plunged on.

Holk Or appeared in the door of the Falcon, his green face blazing as his atom-pistol pumped crashing fire into pirates inside the ship.

"I've got the ship cleared of them!" the Jovian shouted to Kenniston. "Let's get out of here!"

It was time they did so. Almost the last of John Dark's pirates had been possessed by Vestans and had become parasite-dominated robots stumbling off into the jungle. The remaining swarms of gray creatures were scurrying toward Kenniston's group.

They tumbled into the Falcon and slammed shut the space-door. The ship, completely if roughly repaired, was ready for take-off. Captain Walls and the men of the Sunsprite crew hastily started the newly-installed cyclotrons while Kenniston and the others raced up to the bridge.

Kenniston took the controls. He sent the big black pirate ship leaping up into the darkness upon flaming keel and tail-jets, and then it climbed steeply toward the wonderful sky of countless rushing moonlets.

By the time an hour had passed, the Falcon had groped out through the periodic break in the meteor-swarm around the asteroid. And it was throbbing at steadily increasing speed out into the vault of space, away from the World with a Thousand Moons.

"We'll head for Mars," Kenniston told the others. "We can report there to the Patrol."

"If you don't mind," Holk Or put in hastily, "I'd just as soon you dropped me at some asteroid before then. I've no desire to meet the Patrol."

Captain Walls told the Jovian, "Nonsense! After what you've done, you'll get a full pardon from the Patrol."

"You can count on it," Hugh Murdock told the doubtful Jovian. "We have some influence, back at Earth."

"Well, I guess I'll have to go honest, then," sighed Holk Or. "All the real pirate outfits are gone now, anyway." He shook his head heavily as he walked away. "The System sure isn't what it used to be."

Captain Walls was asking Ricky earnestly, "You're quite sure your formula will cure my son? All these years, I've hoped and prayed—"

"I'm certain," Ricky smiled. "Within a few weeks after we get back to Earth,

gravitation-paralysis will be a thing of the past."

They moved off with the others. But Gloria lingered in the bridge with Kenniston.

"Where will you be going, after we get back?" she asked him quietly.

"Oh, back to space," he answered, a little uncomfortably. "There's nothing to hold me on Earth now that Ricky's work has succeeded."

"Nothing to hold you on Earth?" Gloria repeated. "That, I would say, is about the most ungallant speech on record."

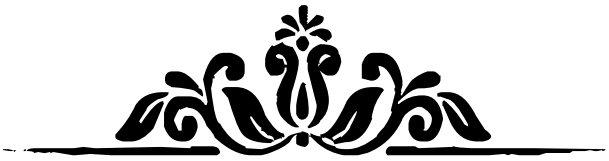
He flushed. "You don't mean—that night on the Sunsprite—you weren't in earnest, surely—"

"Your passionate proposal is accepted," Gloria said calmly.

Kenniston was aghast. "But I didn't propose! I mean—I do love you, and you know it, but you're an heiress, and I—"

"We'll have all the way back to Mars to work that out," she told him. "And I have an idea you'll lose."

Kenniston had the same idea.



THE STOKER AND THE STARS

When you've had your ears pinned back in a bowknot, it's sometimes hard to remember that an intelligent people has no respect for a whipped enemy ... but does for a fairly beaten enemy.

Know him? Yes, I know him—knew him. That was twenty years ago.

Everybody knows him now. Everybody who passed him on the street knows him. Everybody who went to the same schools, or even to different schools in different towns, knows him now. Ask them. But I knew him. I lived three feet away from him for a month and a half. I shipped with him and called him by his first name.

What was he like? What was he thinking, sitting on the edge of his bunk with his jaw in his palm and his eyes on the stars? What did he think he was after?

Well ... Well, I think he— You know, I think I never did know him, after all. Not well. Not as well as some of those people who're writing the books about him seem to.

I couldn't really describe him to you. He had a duffelbag in his hand and a packed airsuit on his back. The skin of his face had been dried out by ship's air, burned by ultraviolet and broiled by infra red. The pupils of his eyes had little cloudy specks in them where the cosmic rays had shot through them. But his eyes were steady and his body was hard. What did he look like? He looked like a man.

It was after the war, and we were

beaten. There used to be a school of thought among us that deplored our combativeness; before we had ever met any people from off Earth, even, you could hear people saying we were toughest, cruelest life-form in the Universe, unfit to mingle with the gentler wiser races in the stars, and a sure bet to steal their galaxy and corrupt it forever. Where these people got their information, I don't know.

We were beaten. We moved out beyond Centaurus, and Sirius, and then we met the Jeks, the Nosurwey, the Lud. We tried Terrestrial know-how, we tried Production Miracles, we tried patriotism, we tried damning the torpedoes and full speed ahead ... and we were smashed back like mayflies in the wind. We died in droves, and we retreated from the guttering fires of a dozen planets, we dug in, we fought through the last ditch, and we were dying on Earth itself before Baker mutinied, shot Cope, and surrendered the remainder of the human race to the wiser, gentler races in the stars. That way, we lived. That way, we were permitted to carry on our little concerns, and mind our manners. The Jeks and the Lud and the Nosurwey returned to their own affairs, and we knew they would leave us alone so long as we didn't bother them.

We liked it that way. Understand me—we didn't accept it, we didn't knuckle under with waiting murder in our hearts—we liked it. We were grateful just to be left alone again. We were happy we hadn't been wiped out like the upstarts the rest of the Universe thought us to be. When they let us keep our own solar system and carry on a trickle of trade with the outside, we accepted it for the fantastically generous gift it was. Too many of our best men were dead for us to have any remaining claim on these things in our own right. I know how it was. I was there, twenty years ago. I was a little, pudgy man with short breath and a high-pitched voice. I was a typical Earthman.

We were out on a God-forsaken landing field on Mars, MacReidie and I, loading cargo aboard the Serenus. MacReidie was First Officer. I was Second. The stranger came walking up to us.

"Got a job?" he asked, looking at MacReidie.

Mac looked him over. He saw the same things I'd seen. He shook his head. "Not for you. The only thing we're short on is stokers."

You wouldn't know. There's no such thing as a stoker any more, with automatic ships. But the stranger knew what Mac meant.

Serenus had what they called an electronic drive. She had to run with an evacuated engine room. The leaking electricity would have broken any stray air down to ozone, which eats metal and rots lungs. So the engine room had the air pumped out of her, and the stokers who tended the dials and set the cathode attitudes had to wear suits, smelling themselves for twelve hours at a time and standing a good chance of cooking where they sat when the drive arced. Serenus was an ugly old tub. At that, we were the better of the two interstellar

freighters the human race had left.

"You're bound over the border, aren't you?"

MacReidie nodded. "That's right. But—"

"I'll stoke."

MacReidie looked over toward me and frowned. I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. I was a little afraid of the stranger, too.

The trouble was the look of him. It was the look you saw in the bars back on Earth, where the veterans of the war sat and stared down into their glasses, waiting for night to fall so they could go out into the alleys and have drunken fights among themselves. But he had brought that look to Mars, to the landing field, and out here there was something disquieting about it.

He'd caught Mac's look and turned his head to me. "I'll stoke," he repeated.

I didn't know what to say. MacReidie and I—almost all of the men in the Merchant Marine—hadn't served in the combat arms. We had freighted supplies, and we had seen ships dying on the runs—we'd had our own brushes with commerce raiders, and we'd known enough men who joined the combat forces. But very few of the men came back, and the war this man had fought hadn't been the same as ours. He'd commanded a fighting ship, somewhere, and come to grips with things we simply didn't know about. The mark was on him, but not on us. I couldn't meet his eyes. "O.K. by me," I mumbled at last.

I saw MacReidie's mouth turn down at the corners. But he couldn't gainsay the man any more than I could. MacReidie wasn't a mumbling man, so he said angrily: "O.K., bucko, you'll stoke. Go and sign on."

"Thanks." The stranger walked quietly away. He wrapped a hand around the cable on a cargo hook and rode into the hold on top of some freight. Mac spat on the ground and went back to supervising his end of the loading. I was busy with mine, and it wasn't until we'd gotten the Serenus loaded and buttoned up that Mac and I even spoke to each other again. Then we talked about the trip. We didn't talk about the stranger.

Daniels, the Third, had signed him on and had moved him into the empty bunk above mine. We slept all in a bunch on the Serenus—officers and crew. Even so, we had to sleep in shifts, with the ship's designers giving ninety per cent of her space to cargo, and eight per cent to power and control. That left very little for the people, who were crammed in any way they could be. I said empty bunk. What I meant was, empty during my sleep shift. That meant he and I'd be sharing work shifts—me up in the control blister, parked in a soft chair, and him down in the engine room, broiling in a suit for twelve hours.

But I ate with him, used the head with him; you can call that rubbing elbows with greatness, if you want to.

He was a very quiet man. Quiet in the way he moved and talked. When we were both climbing into our bunks, that first night, I introduced myself and he introduced himself. Then he heaved himself into his bunk, rolled over on his

side, fixed his straps, and fell asleep. He was always friendly toward me, but he must have been very tired that first night. I often wondered what kind of a life he'd lived after the war—what he'd done that made him different from the men who simply grew older in the bars. I wonder, now, if he really did do anything different. In an odd way, I like to think that one day, in a bar, on a day that seemed like all the rest to him when it began, he suddenly looked up with some new thought, put down his glass, and walked straight to the Earth-Mars shuttle field.

He might have come from any town on Earth. Don't believe the historians too much. Don't pay too much attention to the Chamber of Commerce plaques. When a man's name becomes public property, strange things happen to the facts.

It was MacReidie who first found out what he'd done during the war.

I've got to explain about MacReidie. He takes his opinions fast and strong. He's a good man—is, or was; I haven't seen him for a long while—but he liked things simple.

MacReidie said the duffelbag broke loose and floated into the middle of the bunkroom during acceleration. He opened it to see whose it was. When he found out, he closed it up and strapped it back in its place at the foot of the stoker's bunk.

MacReidie was my relief on the bridge. When he came up, he didn't relieve me right away. He stood next to my chair and looked out through the ports.

"Captain leave any special instructions in the Order Book?" he asked.

"Just the usual. Keep a tight watch and proceed cautiously."

"That new stoker," Mac said.

"Yeah?"

"I knew there was something wrong with him. He's got an old Marine uniform in his duffel."

I didn't say anything. Mac glanced over at me. "Well?"

"I don't know." I didn't.

I couldn't say I was surprised. It had to be something like that, about the stoker. The mark was on him, as I've said.

It was the Marines that did Earth's best dying. It had to be. They were trained to be the best we had, and they believed in their training. They were the ones who slashed back the deepest when the other side hit us. They were the ones who sallied out into the doomed spaces between the stars and took the war to the other side as well as any human force could ever hope to. They were always the last to leave an abandoned position. If Earth had been giving medals to members of her forces in the war, every man in the Corps would have had the Medal of Honor two and three times over. Posthumously. I don't believe there were ten of them left alive when Cope was shot. Cope was one of them. They were a kind of human being neither MacReidie nor I could hope to understand.

"You don't know," Mac said. "It's there. In his duffel. Damn it, we're go-

ing out to trade with his sworn enemies! Why do you suppose he wanted to sign on? Why do you suppose he's so eager to go!"

"You think he's going to try to start something?"

"Think! That's exactly what he's going for. One last big alley fight. One last brawl. When they cut him down—do you suppose they'll stop with him? They'll kill us, and then they'll go in and stamp Earth flat! You know it as well as I do."

"I don't know, Mac," I said. "Go easy." I could feel the knots in my stomach. I didn't want any trouble. Not from the stoker, not from Mac. None of us wanted trouble—not even Mac, but he'd cause it to get rid of it, if you follow what I mean about his kind of man.

Mac hit the viewport with his fist. "Easy! Easy—nothing's easy. I hate this life," he said in a murderous voice. "I don't know why I keep signing on. Mars to Centaurus and back, back and forth, in an old rust tub that's going to blow herself up one of these—"

Daniels called me on the phone from Communications. "Turn up your Intercom volume," he said. "The stoker's jamming the circuit."

I kicked the selector switch over, and this is what I got:

"—so there we were at a million per, and the air was gettin' thick. The Skipper says 'Cheer up, brave boys, we'll—'"

He was singing. He had a terrible voice, but he could carry a tune, and he was hammering it out at the top of his lungs.

"Twas the last cruise of the Venus, by God you should of seen us! The pipes were full of whisky, and just to make things risky, the jets were ..."

The crew were chuckling into their own chest phones. I could hear Daniels trying to cut him off. But he kept going. I started laughing myself. No one's supposed to jam an intercom, but it made the crew feel good. When the crew feels good, the ship runs right, and it had been a long time since they'd been happy.

He went on for another twenty minutes. Then his voice thinned out, and I heard him cough a little. "Daniels," he said, "get a relief down here for me. Jump to it!" He said the last part in a Master's voice. Daniels didn't ask questions. He sent a man on his way down.

He'd been singing, the stoker had. He'd been singing while he worked with one arm dead, one sleeve ripped open and badly patched because the fabric was slippery with blood. There'd been a flashover in the drivers. By the time his relief got down there, he had the insulation back on, and the drive was purring along the way it should have been. It hadn't even missed a beat.

He went down to sick bay, got the arm wrapped, and would have gone back on shift if Daniels'd let him.

Those of us who were going off shift found him toying with the theremin in the mess compartment. He didn't know how to play it, and it sounded like a dog howling.

"Sing, will you!" somebody yelled.

He grinned and went back to the "Good Ship Venus." It wasn't good, but it was loud. From that, we went to "Starways, Farways, and Barways," and "The Freefall Song." Somebody started "I Left Her Behind For You," and that got us off into sentimental things, the way these sessions would sometimes wind up when spacemen were far from home. But not since the war, we all seemed to realize together. We stopped, and looked at each other, and we all began drifting out of the mess compartment.

And maybe it got to him, too. It may explain something. He and I were the last to leave. We went to the bunkroom, and he stopped in the middle of taking off his shirt. He stood there, looking out the porthole, and forgot I was there. I heard him reciting something, softly, under his breath, and I stepped a little closer. This is what it was:

"The rockets rise against the skies, Slowly; in sunlight gleaming With silver hue upon the blue. And the universe waits, dreaming.

"For men must go where the flame-winds blow, The gas clouds softly plaiting; Where stars are spun and worlds begun, And men will find them waiting.

"The song that roars where the rocket soars Is the song of the stellar flame; The dreams of Man and galactic span Are equal and much the same."

What was he thinking of? Make your own choice. I think I came close to knowing him, at that moment, but until human beings turn telepath, no man can be sure of another.

He shook himself like a dog out of cold water, and got into his bunk. I got into mine, and after a while I fell asleep.

I don't know what MacReidie may have told the skipper about the stoker, or if he tried to tell him anything. The captain was the senior ticket holder in the Merchant Service, and a good man, in his day. He kept mostly to his cabin. And there was nothing MacReidie could do on his own authority—nothing simple, that is. And the stoker had saved the ship, and ...

I think what kept anything from happening between MacReidie and the stoker, or anyone else and the stoker, was that it would have meant trouble in the ship. Trouble, confined to our little percentage of the ship's volume, could seem like something much more important than the fate of the human race. It may not seem that way to you. But as long as no one began anything, we could all get along. We could have a good trip.

MacReidie worried, I'm sure. I worried, sometimes. But nothing happened.

When we reached Alpha Centaurus, and set down at the trading field on the second planet, it was the same as the other trips we'd made, and the same kind of landfall. The Lud factor came out of his post after we'd waited for a while, and gave us our permit to disembark. There was a Jek ship at the other end of the field, loaded with the cargo we would get in exchange for our holdful of goods. We had the usual things; wine, music tapes, furs, and the like. The Jeks had been giving us light machinery lately—probably we'd get two or three

more loads, and then they'd begin giving us something else.

But I found that this trip wasn't quite the same. I found myself looking at the factor's post, and I realized for the first time that the Lud hadn't built it. It was a leftover from the old colonial human government. And the city on the horizon—men had built it; the touch of our architecture was on every building. I wondered why it had never occurred to me that this was so. It made the landfall different from all the others, somehow. It gave a new face to the entire planet.

Mac and I and some of the other crewmen went down on the field to handle the unloading. Jeks on self-propelled cargo lifts jockeyed among us, scooping up the loads as we unhooked the slings, bringing cases of machinery from their own ship. They sat atop their vehicles, lean and aloof, dashing in, whirling, shooting across the field to their ship and back like wild horsemen on the plains of Earth, paying us no notice.

We were almost through when Mac suddenly grabbed my arm. "Look!"

The stoker was coming down on one of the cargo slings. He stood upright, his booted feet planted wide, one arm curled up over his head and around the hoist cable. He was in his dusty brown Marine uniform, the scarlet collar tabs bright as blood at his throat, his major's insignia glittering at his shoulders, the battle stripes on his sleeves.

The Jeks stopped their lifts. They knew that uniform. They sat up in their saddles and watched him come down. When the sling touched the ground, he jumped off quietly and walked toward the nearest Jek. They all followed him with their eyes.

"We've got to stop him," Mac said, and both of us started toward him. His hands were both in plain sight, one holding his duffelbag, which was swelled out with the bulk of his airsuit. He wasn't carrying a weapon of any kind. He was walking casually, taking his time.

Mac and I had almost reached him when a Jek with insignia on his coveralls suddenly jumped down from his lift and came forward to meet him. It was an odd thing to see—the stoker, and the Jek, who did not stand as tall. MacReidie and I stepped back.

The Jek was coal black, his scales glittering in the cold sunlight, his hatchet-face inscrutable. He stopped when the stoker was a few paces away. The stoker stopped, too. All the Jeks were watching him and paying no attention to anything else. The field might as well have been empty except for those two.

"They'll kill him. They'll kill him right now," MacReidie whispered.

They ought to have. If I'd been a Jek, I would have thought that uniform was a death warrant. But the Jek spoke to him:

"Are you entitled to wear that?"

"I was at this planet in '39. I was closer to your home world the year before that," the stoker said. "I was captain of a destroyer. If I'd had a cruiser's range, I would have reached it." He looked at the Jek. "Where were you?"

"I was here when you were."

"I want to speak to your ship's captain."

"All right. I'll drive you over."

The stoker nodded, and they walked over to his vehicle together. They drove away, toward the Jek ship.

"All right, let's get back to work," another Jek said to MacReidie and myself, and we went back to unloading cargo.

The stoker came back to our ship that night, without his duffelbag. He found me and said:

"I'm signing off the ship. Going with the Jeks."

MacReidie was with me. He said loudly: "What do you mean, you're going with the Jeks?"

"I signed on their ship," the stoker said. "Stoking. They've got a micronuclear drive. It's been a while since I worked with one, but I think I'll make out all right, even with the screwball way they've got it set up."

"Huh?"

The stoker shrugged. "Ships are ships, and physics is physics, no matter where you go. I'll make out."

"What kind of a deal did you make with them? What do you think you're up to?"

The stoker shook his head. "No deal. I signed on as a crewman. I'll do a crewman's work for a crewman's wages. I thought I'd wander around a while. It ought to be interesting," he said.

"On a Jek ship."

"Anybody's ship. When I get to their home world, I'll probably ship out with some people from farther on. Why not? It's honest work."

MacReidie had no answer to that.

"But—" I said.

"What?" He looked at me as if he couldn't understand what might be bothering me, but I think perhaps he could.

"Nothing," I said, and that was that, except MacReidie was always a sourer man from that time up to as long as I knew him afterwards. We took off in the morning. The stoker had already left on the Jek ship, and it turned out he'd trained an apprentice boy to take his place.

It was strange how things became different for us, little by little after that. It was never anything you could put your finger on, but the Jeks began taking more goods, and giving us things we needed when we told them we wanted them. After a while, Serenus was going a little deeper into Jek territory, and when she wore out, the two replacements let us trade with the Lud, too. Then it was the Nosurwey, and other people beyond them, and things just got better for us, somehow.

We heard about our stoker, occasionally. He shipped with the Lud, and the Nosurwey, and some people beyond them, getting along, going to all kinds of places. Pay no attention to the precise red lines you see on the star maps; nobody knows exactly what path he wandered from people to people. Nobody could. He just kept signing on

with whatever ship was going deeper into the galaxy, going farther and farther. He messed with green shipmates and blue ones. One and two and three heads, tails, six legs—after all, ships are ships and they've all got to have something to push them along. If a man knows his business, why not? A man can live on all kinds of food, if he wants to get used to it. And any nontoxic atmosphere will do, as long as there's enough oxygen in it.

I don't know what he did, to make things so much better for us. I don't know if he did anything, but stoke their ships and, I suppose, fix them when they were in trouble. I wonder if he sang dirty songs in that bad voice of his, to people who couldn't possibly understand what the songs were about. All I know is, for some reason those people slowly began treating us with respect. We changed, too, I think—I'm not the same man I was ... I think—not altogether the same; I'm a captain now, with master's papers, and you won't find me in my cabin very often ... there's a kind of joy in standing on a bridge, looking out at the stars you're moving toward. I wonder if it mightn't have kept my old captain out of that place he died in, finally, if he'd tried it.

So, I don't know. The older I get, the less I know. The thing people remember the stoker for—the thing that makes him famous, and, I think, annoys him—I'm fairly sure is only incidental to what he really did. If he did anything. If he meant to. I wish I could be sure of the exact answer he found in the bottom of that last glass at the bar before he worked his passage to Mars and the Serenus, and began it all.

So, I can't say what he ought to be famous for. But I suppose it's enough to know for sure that he was the first living being ever to travel all the way around the galaxy.

TO EACH HIS STAR

"Nothing around those other suns but ashes and dried blood," old Dunbar told the space-wrecked, desperate men. "Only one way to go, where we can float down through the clouds to Paradise. That's straight ahead to the sun with the red rim around it."

But Dunbar's eyes were old and uncertain. How could they believe in his choice when every star in this forsaken section of space was surrounded by a beckoning red rim?

Here was just blackness, frosty glimmering terrible blackness, going out and out forever in all directions. Russell didn't think they could remain sane in all this blackness much longer. Bitterly he thought of how they would die—not knowing within maybe thousands of light years where they were, or where they were going.

After the wreck, the four of them had floated a while, floated and drifted together, four men in bulbous pressure suits like small individual rockets, held together by an awful pressing need for each other and by the "gravity-rope"

beam.

Dunbar, the oldest of the four, an old space-buster with a face wrinkled like a dried prune, burned by cosmic rays and the suns of worlds so far away they were scarcely credible, had taken command. Suddenly, Old Dunbar had known where they were. Suddenly, Dunbar knew where they were going.

They could talk to one another through the etheric transmitters inside their helmets. They could live ... if this was living ... a long time, if only a man's brain would hold up, Russell thought. The suits were complete units. 700 pounds each, all enclosing shelters, with atmosphere pressure, temperature control, mobility in space, and electric power. Each suit had its own powerplant, reprocessing continuously the precious air breathed by the occupants, putting it back into circulation again after enriching it. Packed with food concentrates. Each suit a rocket, each human being part of a rocket, and the special "life-gun" that went with each suit each blast of which sent a man a few hundred thousand miles further on toward wherever he was going.

Four men, thought Russell, held together by an invisible string of gravity, plunging through a lost pocket of hell's dark where there had never been any sound or life, with old Dunbar the first in line, taking the lead because he was older and knew where he was and where he was going. Maybe Johnson, second in line, and Alvar who was third, knew too, but were afraid to admit it.

But Russell knew it and he'd admitted it from the first—that old Dunbar was as crazy as a Jovian juke-bird.

A lot of time had rushed past into darkness. Russell had no idea now how long the four of them had been plunging toward the red-rimmed sun that never seemed to get any nearer. When the ultra-drive had gone crazy the four of them had blanked out and nobody could say now how long an interim that had been. Nobody knew what happened to a man who suffered a space-time warping like that. When they had regained consciousness, the ship was pretty banged up, and the meteor-repeller shields cracked. A meteor ripped the ship down the center like an old breakfast cannister.

How long ago that had been, Russell didn't know. All Russell knew was that they were millions of light years from any place he had ever heard about, where the galactic space lanterns had absolutely no recognizable pattern. But Dunbar knew. And Russell was looking at Dunbar's suit up ahead, watching it more and more intently, thinking about how Dunbar looked inside that suit—and hating Dunbar more and more for claiming he knew when he didn't, for his drooling optimism—because he was taking them on into deeper darkness and calling their destination Paradise.

Russell wanted to laugh, but the last time he'd given way to this impulse, the results inside his helmet had been too unpleasant to repeat.

Sometimes Russell thought of other things besides his growing hatred of the old man. Sometimes he thought about

the ship, lost back there in the void, and he wondered if wrecked space ships were ever found. Compared with the universe in which one of them drifted, a wrecked ship was a lot smaller than a grain of sand on a nice warm beach back on Earth, or one of those specks of silver dust that floated like strange seeds down the night winds of Venus.

And a human was smaller still, thought Russell when he was not hating Dunbar. Out here, a human being is the smallest thing of all. He thought then of what Dunbar would say to such a thought, how Dunbar would laugh that high piping squawking laugh of his and say that the human being was bigger than the Universe itself.

Dunbar had a big answer for every little thing.

When the four of them had escaped from that prison colony on a sizzling hot asteroid rock in the Ronlwhyn system, that wasn't enough for Dunbar. Hell no—Dunbar had to start talking about a place they could go where they'd never be apprehended, in a system no one else had ever heard of, where they could live like gods on a green soft world like the Earth had been a long time back.

And Dunbar had spouted endlessly about a world of treasure they would find, if they would just follow old Dunbar. That's what all four of them had been trying to find all their lives in the big cold grabbag of eternity—a rich star, a rich far fertile star where no one else had ever been, loaded with treasure that had no name, that no one had ever heard of before. And was, because of that, the richest treasure of all.

We all look alike out here in these big rocket pressure suits, Russell thought. No one for God only knew how many of millions of light years away could see or care. Still—we might have a chance to live, even now, Russell thought—if it weren't for old crazy Dunbar.

They might have a chance if Alvar and Johnson weren't so damn lacking in self-confidence as to put all their trust in that crazed old rum-dum. Russell had known now for some time that they were going in the wrong direction. No reason for knowing. Just a hunch. And Russell was sure his hunch was right.

Russell said. "Look—look to your left and to your right and behind us. Four suns. You guys see those other three suns all around you, don't you?"

"Sure," someone said.

"Well, if you'll notice," Russell said, "the one on the left also now has a red rim around it. Can't you guys see that?"

"Yeah, I see it," Alvar said.

"So now," Johnson said, "there's two suns with red rims around them."

"We're about in the middle of those four suns aren't we, Dunbar?" Russell said.

"That's right, boys!" yelled old Dunbar in that sickeningly optimistic voice. Like a hysterical old woman's. "Just about in the sweet dark old middle."

"You're still sure it's the sun up ahead ... that's the only one with life on it, Dunbar ... the only one we can live on?" Russell asked.

"That's right! That's right," Dunbar yelled. "That's the only one—and it's a paradise. Not just a place to live, boys—but a place you'll have trouble believing in because it's like a dream!"

"And none of these other three suns have worlds we could live on, Dunbar?" Russell asked. Keep the old duck talking like this and maybe Alvar and Johnson would see that he was cracked.

"Yeah," said Alvar. "You still say that, Dunbar?"

"No life, boys, nothing," Dunbar laughed. "Nothing on these other worlds but ashes ... just ashes and iron and dried blood, dried a million years or more."

"When in hell were you ever here?" Johnson said. "You say you were here before. You never said when, or why or anything!"

"It was a long time back boys. Don't remember too well, but it was when we had an old ship called the DOG STAR that I was here. A pirate ship and I was second in command, and we came through this sector. That was—hell, it musta' been fifty years ago. I been too many places nobody's ever bothered to name or chart, to remember where it is, but I been here. I remember those four suns all spotted to form a perfect circle from this point, with us squarely in the middle. We explored all these suns and the worlds that go round 'em. Trust me, boys, and we'll reach the right one. And that one's just like Paradise."

"Paradise is it," Russell whispered hoarsely.

"Paradise and there we'll be like gods, like Mercuries with wings flying on nights of sweet song. These other suns, don't let them bother you. They're Jezebels of stars. All painted up in the darkness and pretty and waiting and calling and lying! They make you think of nice green worlds all running waters and dews and forests thick as fleas on a wet dog. But it ain't there, boys. I know this place. I been here, long time back."

Russell said tightly. "It'll take us a long time won't it? If it's got air we can breath, and water we can drink and shade we can rest in—that'll be paradise enough for us. But it'll take a long time won't it? And what if it isn't there—what if after all the time we spend hoping and getting there—there won't be nothing but ashes and cracked clay?"

"I know we're going right," Dunbar said cheerfully. "I can tell. Like I said—you can tell it because of the red rim around it."

"But the sun on our left, you can see—it's got a red rim too now," Russell said.

"Yeah, that's right," said Alvar. "Sometimes I see a red rim around the one we're going for, sometimes a red rim around that one on the left. Now, sometimes I'm not sure either of them's got a red rim. You said that one had a red rim, Dunbar, and I wanted to believe it. So now maybe we're all seeing a red rim that was never there."

Old Dunbar laughed. The sound brought blood hotly to Russell's face. "We're heading to the right one, boys. Don't doubt me ... I been here. We explored all these sun systems. And I re-

member it all. The second planet from that red-rimmed sun. You come down through a soft atmosphere, floating like in a dream. You see the green lakes coming up through the clouds and the women dancing and the music playing. I remember seeing a ship there that brought those women there, a long long time before ever I got there. A land like heaven and women like angels singing and dancing and laughing with red lips and arms white as milk, and soft silky hair floating in the winds."

Russell was very sick of the old man's voice. He was at least glad he didn't have to look at the old man now. His bald head, his skinny bobbing neck, his simpering watery blue eyes. But he still had to suffer that immutable babbling, that idiotic cheerfulness ... and knowing all the time the old man was crazy, that he was leading them wrong.

I'd break away, go it alone to the right sun, Russell thought—but I'd never make it alone. A little while out here alone and I'd be nuttier than old Dunbar will ever be, even if he keeps on getting nuttier all the time.

Somewhere, sometime then ... Russell got the idea that the only way was to get rid of Dunbar.

ou mean to tell us there are people living by that red-rimmed sun," Russell said.

"Lost people ... lost ... who knows how long," Dunbar said, as the four of them hurtled along. "You never know where you'll find people on a world somewhere nobody's ever named or knows about. Places where a lost ship's landed and never got up again, or wrecked itself so far off the lanes they'll never be found except by accident for millions of years. That's what this world is, boys. Must have been a ship load of beautiful people, maybe actresses and people like that being hauled to some outpost to entertain. They're like angels now, living in a land all free from care. Every place you see green forests and fields and blue lakes, and at nights there's three moons that come around the sky in a thousand different colors. And it never gets cold ... it's always spring, always spring, boys, and the music plays all night, every night of a long long year...."

Russell suddenly shouted. "Keep quiet, Dunbar. Shut up will you?"

Johnson said. "Dunbar—how long'll it take us?"

"Six months to a year, I'd say," Dunbar yelled happily. "That is—of our hereditary time."

"What?" croaked Alvar.

Johnson didn't say anything at all.

Russell screamed at Dunbar, then quieted down. He whispered. "Six months to a year—out here—cooped up in these damn suits. You're crazy as hell, Dunbar. Crazy ... crazy! Nobody could stand it. We'll all be crazier than you are—"

"We'll make it, boys. Trust ole' Dunbar. What's a year when we know we're getting to Paradise at the end of it? What's a year out here ... it's paradise ain't it, compared with that prison hole we were rotting in? We can make it. We have the food concentrates, and

all the rest. All we need's the will, boys, and we got that. The whole damn Universe isn't big enough to kill the will of a human being, boys. I been over a whole lot of it, and I know. In the old days—"

"The hell with the old days," screamed Russell.

"Now quiet down, Russ," Dunbar said in a kind of dreadful crooning whisper. "You calm down now. You younger fellows—you don't look at things the way we used to. Thing is, we got to go straight. People trapped like this liable to start meandering. Liable to start losing the old will-power."

He chuckled.

"Yeah," said Alvar. "Someone says maybe we ought to go left, and someone says to go right, and someone else says to go in another direction. And then someone says maybe they'd better go back the old way. An' pretty soon something breaks, or the food runs out, and you're a million million miles from someplace you don't care about any more because you're dead. All frozen up in space ... preserved like a piece of meat in a cold storage locker. And then maybe in a million years or so some lousy insect man from Jupiter comes along and finds you and takes you away to a museum...."

"Shut up!" Johnson yelled.

Dunbar laughed. "Boys, boys, don't get panicky. Keep your heads. Just stick to old Dunbar and he'll see you through. I'm always lucky. Only one way to go ... an' that's straight ahead to the sun with the red-rim around it ... and then we tune in the gravity repellers, and coast down, floating and singing down through the clouds to paradise."

After that they traveled on for what seemed months to Russell, but it couldn't have been over a day or two of the kind of time-sense he had inherited from Earth.

Then he saw how the other two stars also were beginning to develop red rims. He yelled this fact out to the others. And Alvar said. "Russ's right. That sun to the right, and the one behind us ... now they ALL have red rims around them. Dunbar—" A pause and no awareness of motion.

Dunbar laughed. "Sure, they all maybe have a touch of red, but it isn't the same, boys. I can tell the difference. Trust me—"

Russell half choked on his words. "You old goat! With those old eyes of yours, you couldn't see your way into a fire!"

"Don't get panicky now. Keep your heads. In another year, we'll be there—"

"God, you gotta' be sure," Alvar said. "I don't mind dyin' out here. But after a year of this, and then to get to a world that was only ashes, and not able to go any further—"

"I always come through, boys. I'm lucky. Angel women will take us to their houses on the edges of cool lakes, little houses that sit there in the sun like fancy jewels. And we'll walk under colored fountains, pretty colored fountains just splashing and splashing like pretty rain on our hungry hides. That's worth wait-

ing for."

Russell did it before he hardly realized he was killing the old man. It was something he had had to do for a long time and that made it easy. There was a flash of burning oxygen from inside the suit of Dunbar. If he'd aimed right, Russell knew the fire-bullet should have pierced Dunbar's back. Now the fire was gone, extinguished automatically by units inside the suit. The suit was still inflated, self-sealing. Nothing appeared to have changed. The four of them hurtling on together, but inside that first suit up there on the front of the gravity rope, Dunbar was dead.

He was dead and his mouth was shut for good.

Dunbar's last faint cry from inside his suit still rang in Russell's ears, and he knew Alvar and Johnson had heard it too. Alvar and Johnson both called Dunbar's name a few times. There was no answer.

"Russ—you shouldn't have done that," Johnson whispered. "You shouldn't have done that to the old man!"

"No," Alvar said, so low he could barely be heard. "You shouldn't have done it."

"I did it for the three of us," Russell said. "It was either him or us. Lies ... lies that was all he had left in his crazy head. Paradise ... don't tell me you guys don't see the red rims around all four suns, all four suns all around us. Don't tell me you guys didn't know he was batty, that you really believed all that stuff he was spouting all the time!"

"Maybe he was lying, maybe not," Johnson said. "Now he's dead anyway."

"Maybe he was wrong, crazy, full of lies," Alvar said. "But now he's dead."

"How could he see any difference in those four stars?" Russell said, louder.

"He thought he was right," Alvar said. "He wanted to take us to paradise. He was happy, nothing could stop the old man—but he's dead now."

He sighed.

"He was taking us wrong ... wrong!" Russell screamed. "Angels—music all night—houses like jewels—and women like angels—"

"Shhhh," said Alvar. It was quiet. How could it be so quiet, Russell thought? And up ahead the old man's pressure suit with a corpse inside went on ahead, leading the other three at the front of the gravity-rope.

"Maybe he was wrong," Alvar said. "But now do we know which way is right?"

ometime later, Johnson said, "We got to decide now. Let's forget the old man. Let's forget him and all that's gone and let's start now and decide what to do."

And Alvar said, "Guess he was crazy all right, and I guess we trusted him because we didn't have the strength to make up our own minds. Why does a crazy man's laugh sound so good when you're desperate and don't know what to do?"

"I always had a feeling we were going wrong," Johnson said. "Anyway, it's forgotten, Russ. It's swallowed up in the darkness all around. It's never been."

Russell said, "I've had a hunch all along that maybe the old man was here before, and that he was right about there being a star here with a world we can live on. But I've known we was heading wrong. I've had a hunch all along that the right star was the one to the left."

"I don't know," Johnson sighed. "I been feeling partial toward that one on the right. What about you, Alvar?"

"I always thought we were going straight in the opposite direction from what we should, I guess. I always wanted to turn around and go back. It won't make over maybe a month's difference. And what does a month matter anyway out here—hell there never was any time out here until we came along. We make our own time here, and a month don't matter to me."

Sweat ran down Russell's face. His voice trembled. "No—that's wrong. You're both wrong." He could see himself going it alone. Going crazy because he was alone. He'd have broken away, gone his own direction, long ago but for that fear.

"How can we tell which of us is right?" Alvar said. "It's like everything was changing all the time out here. Sometimes I'd swear none of those suns had red rims, and at other times—like the old man said, they're all pretty and lying and saying nothing, just changing all the time. Jezebel stars, the old man said."

"I know I'm right," Russell pleaded. "My hunches always been right. My hunch got us out of that prison didn't it? Listen—I tell you it's that star to the left—"

"The one to the right," said Johnson.

"We been going away from the right one all the time," said Alvar.

"We got to stay together," said Russell. "Nobody could spend a year out here ... alone...."

"Ah ... in another month or so we'd be lousy company anyway," Alvar said. "Maybe a guy could get to the point where he'd sleep most of the time ... just wake up enough times to give himself another boost with the old life-gun."

"We got to face it," Johnson said finally. "We three don't go on together any more."

"That's it," said Alvar. "There's three suns that look like they might be right seeing as how we all agree the old man was wrong. But we believe there is one we can live by, because we all seem to agree that the old man might have been right about that. If we stick together, the chance is three to one against us. But if each of us makes for one star, one of us has a chance to live. Maybe not in paradise like the old man said, but a place where we can live. And maybe there'll be intelligent life, maybe even a ship, and whoever gets the right star can come and help the other two...."

"No ... God no...." Russell whispered over and over. "None of us can ever make it alone...."

Alvar said, "We each take the star he likes best. I'll go back the other way. Russ, you take the left. And you, Johnson, go to the right."

Johnson started to laugh. Russell was yelling wildly at them, and above his

own yelling he could hear Johnson's rising laughter. "Every guy's got a star of his own," Johnson said when he stopped laughing. "And we got ours. A nice red-rimmed sun for each of us to call his very own."

"Okay," Alvar said. "We cut off the gravity rope, and each to his own sun."

Now Russell wasn't saying anything.

"And the old man," Alvar said, "can keep right on going toward what he thought was right. And he'll keep on going. Course he won't be able to give himself another boost with the life-gun, but he'll keep going. Someday he'll get to that red-rimmed star of his. Out here in space, once you're going, you never stop ... and I guess there isn't any other body to pull him off his course. And what will time matter to old Dunbar? Even less than to us, I guess. He's dead and he won't care."

"Ready," Johnson said. "I'll cut off the gravity rope."

"I'm ready," Alvar said. "To go back toward whatever it was I started from."

"Ready, Russ?"

Russell couldn't say anything. He stared at the endless void which now he would share with no one. Not even crazy old Dunbar.

"All right," Johnson said. "Goodbye."

Russell felt the release, felt the sudden inexplicable isolation and aloneness even before Alvar and Johnson used their life-guns and shot out of sight, Johnson toward the left and Alvar back toward that other red-rimmed sun behind them.

And old Dunbar shooting right on ahead. And all three of them dwindling and dwindling and blinking out like little lights.

Fading, he could hear their voices. "Each to his own star," Johnson said. "On a bee line."

"On a bee line," Alvar said.

Russell used his own life-gun and in a little while he didn't hear Alvar or Johnson's voices, nor could he see them. They were thousands of miles away, and going further all the time.

Russell's head fell forward against the front of his helmet, and he closed his eyes. "Maybe," he thought, "I shouldn't have killed the old man. Maybe one sun's as good as another...."

Then he raised his body and looked out into the year of blackness that waited for him, stretching away to the red-rimmed sun. Even if he were right—he was sure now he'd never make it alone.

The body inside the pressure suit drifted into a low-level orbit around the second planet from the sun of its choice, and drifted there a long time. A stratocruiser detected it by chance because of the strong concentration of radio-activity that came from it.

They took the body down to one of the small, quiet towns on the edge of one of the many blue lakes where the domed houses were like bright joyful jewels. They got the leathery, well-preserved body from the pressure suit.

"An old man," one of them mused. "A very old man. From one of the lost sectors. I wonder how and why he came so very far from his home?"

"Wrecked a ship out there, probably," one of the others said. "But he managed to get this far. It looks as though a small meteor fragment pierced his body. Here. You see?"

"Yes," another of them said. "But what amazes me is that this old man picked this planet out of all the others. The only one in this entire sector that would sustain life."

"Maybe he was just a very lucky old man. Yes ... a man who attains such an age was usually lucky. Or at least that is what they say about the lost sectors."

"Maybe he knew the way here. Maybe he was here before—sometime."

The other shook his head. "I don't think so. They say some humans from that far sector did land here—but that's probably only a myth. And if they did, it was well over a thousand years ago."

Another said. "He has a fine face, this old man. A noble face. Whoever he is ... wherever he came from, he died bravely and he knew the way, though he never reached this haven of the lost alive."

"Nor is it irony that he reached here dead," said the Lake Chieftain. He had been listening and he stepped forward and raised his arm. "He was old. It is obvious that he fought bravely, that he had great courage, and that he knew the way. He will be given a burial suitable to his stature, and he will rest here among the brave.

"Let the women dance and the music play for this old man. Let the trumpets speak, and the rockets fly up. And let flowers be strewn over the path above which the women will carry him to rest."

CONTAMINATION CREW

Orders were orders! The creature had to be killed. But just how does one destroy the indestructible?

(The following is taken from the files of the Medical Disciplinary Board, Hospital Earth, from the preliminary hearings in re: The Profession vs. Samuel B. Jenkins, Physician; First Court of Medical Affairs, final action pending.)

COM COD S221VB73 VOROCHISLOV SECTOR; 4th GALACTIC PERIOD 22, 2341 GENERAL SURVEY SHIP MERCY TO HOSPITAL EARTH

VIA: FASTEST POSSIBLE ROUTING, PRIORITY UNASSIGNED

TO: Lucius Darby, Physician Grade I, Black Service Director of Galactic Periphery Services, Hospital Earth

FROM: Samuel B. Jenkins, Physician Grade VI, Red Service General Practice Patrol Ship Lancet (Attached GSS Mercy pro tem)

SIR: The following communication is directed to your attention in hopes that it may anticipate various charges which are certain to be placed against me as a Physician of the Red Service upon the return of the General Survey Ship Mercy to Hospital Earth (expected arrival four

months from above date).

These charges will undoubtedly be preferred by one Turvold Neelsen, Physician Grade II of the Black Service, and Commander of the Mercy on its current survey mission into the Vorochislov Sector. Exactly what the charges will be I cannot say, since the Black Doctor in question refuses either audience or communication with me at the present time; however, it seems likely that treason, incompetence and mutinous insubordination will be among the milder complaints registered. It is possible that even Malpractice might be added, so you can readily understand the reasons for this statement— The following will also clarify my attached request that the GSS Mercy, upon arrival in orbit around Hospital Earth, be met immediately by a decontamination ship carrying a vat of hydrochloric acid, concentration 3.7%, measuring no less than twenty by thirty by fifty feet, and that Quarantine officials be prepared to place the entire crew of the Mercy under physical and psychiatric observation for a period of no less than six weeks upon disembarkation.

The facts, in brief, are as follows:

Three months ago, as crew of the General Practice Patrol Ship Lancet, my colleague Green Doctor Wallace Stone and myself began investigating certain peculiar conditions existing on the fourth planet of Mauki, Vorochislov Sector (Class I Medical Service Contract.) The entire population of that planet was found to be suffering from a mass psychotic delusion of rather spectacular proportions: namely, that they and their entire planet were in imminent danger of being devoured, in toto, by an indestructible non-humanoid creature which they called a hlorg. The Maukivi were insistent that a hlorg had already totally consumed a non-existent outer planet in their system, and was now hard at work on neighboring Mauki V. It was their morbid fear that Mauki IV was next on its list. No amount of reassurance could convince them of the foolishness of these fears, although we exhausted our energy, our patience, and our food and medical supplies in the effort. Ultimately we referred the matter to the Grey Service, feeling confident that it was a psychiatric problem rather than medical or surgical. We applied to the GSS Mercy to take us aboard to replenish our ship's supplies, and provide us a much-needed recovery period. The Black Doctor in command approved our request and brought us aboard.

The trouble began two days later....

There were three classes of dirty words in use by the men who travelled the spaceways back and forth from Hospital Earth.

There were the words you seldom used in public, but which were colorful and descriptive in private use.

Then there were the words which you seldom used even in private, but which effectively relieved feelings when directed at mirrors, inanimate objects, and people who had just left the room.

Finally, there were the words that you just didn't use, period. You knew they existed; you'd heard them used at

one time or another, but to hear them spoken out in plain Earth-English was enough to rock the most space-hardened of the Galactic Pill Peddlers back on his well-worn heels.

Black Doctor Turvold Neelsen's Earth-English was spotty at best, but the word came through without any possibility of misinterpretation. Red Doctor Sam Jenkins stared at the little man and felt his face turning as scarlet as the lining of his uniform cape.

"But that's ridiculous!" he finally stammered. "Quite aside from the language you use to suggest it."

"Ah! So the word still has some punch left, eh? At least you puppies bring something away from your Medical Training, even if it's only taboos." The Black Doctor scowled across the desk at Jenkins' lanky figure. "But sometimes, my good Doctor, it is better to face a fact than to wait for the fact to face you. Sometimes we have to crawl out of our ivory towers for a minute or two;you know?"

Jenkins reddened again. He had never had any great love for physicians of the Black Service;who did?;but he found himself disliking this short, blunt-spoken man even more cordially than most. "Why implicate the Lancet?" he burst out. "You've landed the Mercy on plenty of planets before we brought the Lancet aboard her."

"But we did not have it with us before the Lancet came aboard, and we do have it now. The implication is obvious. You have brought aboard a contaminant."

He'd said it again.

Red Doctor Jenkins' face darkened. "The Green Doctor and I have maintained the Lancet in perfect conformity with the Sterility Code. We've taken every precaution on both landing and disembarking procedures. What's more, we've spent the last three months on a planet with no mutually compatible flora or fauna. From Hospital Earth viewpoint, Mauki IV is sterile. We made only the briefest check-stop on Mauki V before joining you. It was a barren rock, but we decontaminated again after leaving. If you have a;a contaminant on board your ship, sir, it didn't come from the Lancet. And I won't be held responsible."

It was strong language to use to a Black Doctor, and Sam Jenkins knew it. There were doctors of the Green and Red Services who had spent their professional lives on some god-forsaken planetoid at the edge of the Galaxy for saying less. Red Doctor Sam Jenkins was too near the end of his Internship, too nearly ready for his first Permanent Planetary Appointment with the rank, honor, and responsibility it carried to lightly risk throwing it to the wind at this stage— But a Red Doctor does not bring a contaminant aboard a survey ship, he thought doggedly, no matter what the Black Doctor says— Neelsen looked at the young man slowly. Then he shrugged. "Of course, I'm merely a pathologist. I realize that we know nothing of medicine, nor of disease, nor of the manner in which disease is spread. All this is beyond our scope. But perhaps you'll permit one simple question from a dull old man, just to humor him."

Jenkins looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Just so. You've had a very successful cruise this year with the Lancet, I understand."

Jenkins nodded.

"A most successful cruise. Four planets elevated from Class IV to Class II contracts, they tell me. Morua II elevated from Class VI to Class I, with certain special riders. A plague-panic averted on Setman I, and a very complex virus-bacteria symbiosis unravelled on Orb III. An illustrious record. You and your colleague from the Green Service are hoping for a year's exemption from training, I imagine." The Black Doctor looked up sharply. "You searched your holds after leaving the Mauki planets, I presume?"

Jenkins blinked. "Why;no, sir. That is, we decontaminated according to."

"I see. You didn't search your holds. I suppose you didn't notice your food supplies dwindling at an alarming rate?"

"No." The Red Doctor hesitated. "Not really."

"Ah." The Black Doctor closed his eyes wearily and flipped an activator switch. The scanner on the far wall buzzed into activity. It focussed on the rear storage hold of the Mercy where the little Lancet was resting on its landing rack. "Look closely, Doctor."

At first Jenkins saw nothing. Then his eye caught a long, pink glistening strand lying across the floor of the hold. The scanner picked up the strand, followed it to the place where it emerged from a neat pencil-sized hole in the hull of the Lancet. The strand snaked completely across the room and disappeared through another neat hole in the wall into the next storage hold.

Jenkins shook his head as the scanner flipped back to the hole in the Lancet's hull. Even as he watched, the hole enlarged and a pink blob began to emerge. The blob kept coming and coming until it rested soggily on the edge of the hole. Then it teetered and fell splat on the floor.

"Friend of yours?" the Black Doctor asked casually.

It was a pink heap of jelly just big enough to fill a scrub bucket. It sat on the floor, quivering noxiously. Then it sent out pseudopods in several directions, probing the metal floor. After a few moments it began oozing along the strand of itself that lay on the floor, and squeezed through the hole into the next hold.

"Ugh," said Sam Jenkins, feeling suddenly sick.

"The hydroponic tanks are in there," the Black Doctor said. "You've seen one of those before?"

"Not in person." Jenkins shook his head weakly. "Only pictures. It's a hlorg. We thought it was only a Maukivi persecution fantasy."

"This thing is growing pretty fast for a persecution fantasy. We spotted it eight hours ago, demolishing what was left of your food supply. It's twice as big now as it was then."

"Well, we've got to get rid of it," said Jenkins, suddenly coming to life.

"Amen, Doctor."

"I'll get the survey crew alerted right away. We won't waste a minute. And my apologies." Jenkins was hurrying for the door. "I'll get it cleared out of here fast."

"I do hope so," said the Black Doctor. "The thing makes me ill just to think about."

"I'll give you a clean-ship report in twenty-four hours," the Red Doctor said as confidently as he could and beat a hasty retreat down the corridor. He was wishing fervently that he felt as confident as he sounded.

The Maukivi had described the hlorg in excruciating detail. He and Green Doctor Stone had listened, and smiled sadly at each other, day after day, marvelling at the fanciful delusion. Hlorgs, indeed! And such creatures to dream up;eating, growing, devouring plant, animal and mineral without discrimination— And the Maukivi had stoutly maintained that this hlorg of theirs was indestructible— Green Doctor Wally Stone, true to his surgical calling, was a man of action.

"You mean there is such a thing?" he exploded when his partner confronted him with the news. "For real? Not just somebody's pipe dream?"

"There is," said Jenkins, "and we've got it. Here. On board the Mercy. It's eating like hell-and-gone and doubling its size every eight hours."

"Well what are you waiting for? Toss it overboard!"

"Fine! And what happens to the next party it happens to land on? We're supposed to be altruists, remember? We're supposed to worry about the health of the Galaxy." Jenkins shook his head. "Whatever we do with it, we have to find out just what we're tossing before we toss."

The creature had made itself at home aboard the Mercy. In the spirit of uninvited guests since time immemorial, it had established a toehold with remarkable asperity, and now was digging in for the long winter. Drawn to the hydroponic tanks like a flea to a dog, the hlorg had settled its bulbous pink body down in their murky depths with a contented gurgle. As it grew larger the tank-levels grew lower, the broth clearer.

The fact that the twenty-five crewmen of the Mercy depended on those tanks for their food supply on the four-month run back to Hospital Earth didn't seem to bother the hlorg a bit. It just sank down wetly and began to eat.

Under Jenkins' whip hand, and with Green Doctor Stone's assistance, the Survey Crew snapped into action. Survey was the soul and lifeblood of the medical services supplied by Hospital Earth to the inhabited planets of the Galaxy. Centuries before, during the era of exploration, every Earth ship had carried a rudimentary Survey Crew;a physiologist, a biochemist, an immunologist, a physician;to determine the safety of landings on unknown planets. Other races were more advanced in technological and physical sciences, in sales or in merchandising;but in the biological sciences men of Earth stood unexcelled in the Galaxy. It was not sur-

prising that their casual offerings of medical services wherever their ships touched had led to a growing demand for those services, until the first Medical Service Contract with Deneb III had formalized the planetary specialty. Earth had become Hospital Earth, physician to a Galaxy, surgeon to a thousand worlds, midwife to those susceptible to midwifery and psychiatrist to those whose inner lives zigged when their outer lives zagged.

In the early days it had been a haphazard arrangement; but gradually distinct Services appeared to handle problems of medicine, surgery, radiology, psychiatry and all the other functions of a well-appointed medical service. Under the direction of the Black Service of Pathology, Hospital ships and Survey ships were dispatched to serve as bases for the tiny General Practice Patrol ships that answered the calls of the planets under Contract.

But it was the Survey ships that did the basic dirty-work on any new planet taken under Contract;outlining the physiological and biochemical aspects of the races involved, studying their disease patterns, their immunological types, their susceptibility to medical, surgical, or psychiatric treatment. It was an exacting service to perform, and Survey did an exacting job.

Now, with their own home base invaded by a hungry pink jelly-blob, the Survey Crew of the Mercy dug in with all fours to find a way to exorcise it.

The early returns were not encouraging.

Bowman, the anatomist, spent six hours with the creature. He'd go after the functional anatomy first, he thought, as he approached the task with gusto. Special organs, vital organ systems;after all, every Achilles had his heel. Functional would spot it if anything would— Six hours later he rendered a preliminary report. It consisted of a blank sheet of paper and an expression of wild frustration.

"What's this supposed to mean?" Jenkins asked.

"Just what it says."

"But it says nothing!"

"That's exactly what it means." Bowman was a thin, wistful-looking man with a hawk nose and a little brown mustache. He subbed as ship's cook when things were slow in his specialty. He wasn't a very good cook, but what could anyone do with the sludge from the harvest shelf of a hydroponic tank? Now, with the hlorg incumbent, there wasn't even any sludge.

"I drained off a tank and got a good look at it before it crawled over into the next one," Bowman said. "Ugly bastard. But from a strictly anatomical standpoint I can't help you a bit."

Green Doctor Stone glowered over Jenkins' shoulder at the man. "But surely you can give us something."

Bowman shrugged. "You want it technical?"

"Any way you like."

"Your hlorg is an ideal anamorph. A nothing. Protoplasm, just protoplasm."

Jenkins looked up sharply. "What about his cellular organization?"

"No cells," said Bowman. "Unless they're sub-microscopic, and I'd need an electron-peeker to tell you that."

"No organ systems?"

"Not even an integument. You saw how slippery he looked? That's why. There's nothing holding him in but energy."

"Now, look," said Stone. "He eats, doesn't he? He must have waste materials of some sort."

Bowman shook his head unhappily. "Sorry. No urates. No nitrates. No CO2. Anyway, he doesn't eat because he has nothing to eat with. He absorbs. And that includes the lining of the tanks, which he seems to like as much as the contents. He doesn't bore those holes he makes;he dissolves them."

They sent Bowman back to quarters for a hot bath and a shot of Happy-O and looked up Hrunta, the biochemist.

Hrunta was glaring at paper electrophoretic patterns and pulling out chunks of hair around his bald spot. He gave them a snarl and shoved a sheaf of papers into their hands.

"Metabolic survey?" Jenkins asked.

"Plus," said Hrunta. "You're not going to like it, either."

"Why not? If it grows, it metabolizes. If it metabolizes, we can kill it. Axiom number seventeen, paragraph number four."

"Oh, it metabolizes, all right, but you'd better find yourself another axiom, pretty quick."

"Why?"

"Because it not only metabolizes, it consumes. There's no sign of the usual protein-carbohydrate-fat metabolism going on here. This baby has an enzyme system that's straight from hell. It bypasses the usual metabolic activities that produce heat and energy and gets right down to basic-basic."

Jenkins swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"It attacks the nuclear structure of whatever matter the creature comes in contact with. There's a partial mass-energy conversion in its rawest form. The creature goes after carbon-bearing substances first, since the C seems to break down more easily than anything else;hence its preference for plant and animal material over non-C stuff. But it can use anything if it has to."

Jenkins stared at the little biochemist, an image in his mind of the pink creature in the hold, growing larger by the minute as it ate its way through the hydroponics, through the dry stores, through— "Is there anything it can't use?"

"If there is, I haven't found it," Hrunta said sadly. "In fact, I can't see any reason why it couldn't consume this ship and everything in it, right down to the last rivet."

They walked down to the hold for another look at their uninvited guest, and almost wished they hadn't.

It had reached the size of a small hippopotamus, although the resemblance ended there. Twenty hours had elapsed since the survey had begun. The hlorg had used every minute of it, draining the tanks, engulfing dry stores, devouring

walls and floors as it spread out in search of food, leaving trails of eroded metal wherever it went.

It was ugly;ugly in its pink shapelessness, ugly in its slimy half-sentient movements, in its very purposefulness. But its ugliness went even deeper, stirring primordial feelings of revulsion and loathing in their minds as they watched it oozing implacably across the hold to another dry-storage bin.

Wally Stone shuddered. "It's grown."

"Too fast. Bowman charts it as geometric progression."

Stone scratched his jaw as a lone pink pseudopod pushed out on the floor toward him. Then he leaped forward and stamped on it, severing the strand from the body.

The severed member quivered and lay still for a moment. Then it flowed back to rejoin the body with a wet gurgle.

Stone looked at his half-dissolved shoe.

"Egotropism," Jenkins said. "Bowman played around with that, too. A severed piece will rejoin if it can. If it can't it just takes up independent residence and we have two hlorgs."

"What happens to it outside the ship?" Stone wanted to know.

"It falls dormant for several hours, and then splits up into a thousand independent chunks. One of the boys spent half of yesterday out there gathering them up. I tell you, this thing is equipped to survive."

"So are we," said Green Doctor Stone grimly. "If we can't outwit this free-flowing gob of obscenity, we deserve anything we get. Let's have a conference."

They met in the pilot room. The Black Doctor was there; so were Bowman and Hrunta. Chambers, the physiologist, was glumly clasping and unclasping his hands in a corner. The geneticist, Piccione, drew symbols on a scratch pad and stared blankly at the wall.

Jenkins was saying: "Of course, these are only preliminary reports, but they serve to outline the problem. This is not just an annoyance any longer, it's a crisis. We'd all better understand that."

The Black Doctor cut him off with a wave of his hand, and glowered at the papers as he read them through minutely. As he sat hunched at the desk with the black cowl of his office hanging down from his shoulders he looked like a squat black judge, Jenkins thought, a shadow from the Inquisition, a Passer of Spells. But there was no medievalism in Black Doctor Neelsen. In fact, it was for that reason, and only that reason, that the Black Service had come to be the leaders and the whips, the executors and directors of all the manifold operations of Hospital Earth.

The physicians of the General Practice Patrol were fledglings, newly trained in their specialties, inexperienced in the rigorous discipline of medicine that was required of the directors of permanent Planetary Dispensaries in the heavily populated systems of

the Galaxy. On outlying worlds where little was known of the ways of medicine, the temptation was great to substitute faith for knowledge, cant for investigation, nonsense rituals for hard work. But the physicians of the Black Service were always waiting to jerk wandering neophytes back to the scientific disciplines that made the service of Hospital Earth so effective. The Black Doctors would not tolerate sloppiness. "Show me the tissue, Doctor," they would say. "Prove to me that what you say is so. Prove that what you did was valid medicine...." Their laboratories were the morgues and autopsy rooms of a thousand planets, the Temples of Truth from which no physician since the days of Pasteur and Lister could escape for long and retain his position.

The Black Doctors were the pragmatists, the gadflies of Hospital Earth.

For this reason it was surprising to hear Black Doctor Neelsen saying, "Perhaps we are being too scientific, just now. When the creature has exhausted our food stores, it will look elsewhere for food. Perhaps we must cut at the tree and not at the root."

"A frontal attack?" said Jenkins.

"Just so. Its enzyme system is its vulnerability. Enzyme systems operate under specific optimum conditions, right? And every known enzyme system can be inactivated by adverse conditions of one sort or another. A physical approach may tell us how in this case. Meanwhile we will be on emergency rations, and hope that we don't starve to death finding out." The Black Doctor paused, looking at the men around him. "And in case you are thinking of enlisting help from outside, forget it. I've sent plague-warnings out for Galactic relay. We have this thing isolated, and we're going to keep it that way as long as I command this ship."

They went gloomily back to their laboratories to plan their frontal attack.

That was the night that Hrunta disappeared.

He was gone when they came to wake him from his sleep period. His bunk had been slept in, but he wasn't in it. In fact, he wasn't anywhere on the ship.

"But he couldn't just vanish!" the Black Doctor burst out when they told him the news. "Maybe he's hiding somewhere. Maybe this business was working on his mind."

Green Doctor Stone took a crew of men to search the ship again, even though he considered it a waste of precious time. He had his private convictions about where Hrunta had gone.

So did every other man on the ship, including Jenkins.

The hlorg had stopped eating. Huge and round and wet and ugly, it squatted in the after-hold, quivering gently, without any other sign of life.

Surfeited. Like a fat man after a turkey dinner.

Jenkins reviewed progress with the others. No stone had been left unturned. They had sliced the hlorg, and squeezed it. They had boiled it and frozen it. They had dropped chunks of it in acid vats and covered other chunks with desic-

cants and alkalis. Nothing seemed to bother it.

A cold environment slowed down its activity, true, but it also stimulated the process of fission. Warmed up again, the portions sucked back together again and resumed eating.

Heat was a little more effective, but not much. It stunned the creature for a brief period, but it would not burn. It hissed frightfully and gave off an overpowering stench, and curled up at the edges, but as soon as the heat was turned off it began to recover.

In Hrunta's lab chunks of the hlorg sat in a dozen vats on tables and in sinks. Some contained antibiotics, some concentrated acids, some desiccants. In each vat a blob of pink protoplasm wiggled happily, showing no sign of discomfiture. On another table were the remains of Hrunta's (unsuccessful) attempt to prepare an anti-hlorg serum.

But no Hrunta.

"He was down there with the thing all day," Bowman said sadly. "He felt it was his responsibility, really. Hrunta thought biochemistry was the answer to all things, of course. Very conscientious man."

"But he was in bed."

"He claimed he did his best thinking in bed. Maybe he had a brainstorm and went down to try it out, and."

"Yes." Jenkins nodded sourly. "And." He walked down the row of vats. "You'd think that at least concentrated sulphuric would dessicate it a little. But it's just formed a crust of coagulated protein around itself, and sits there."

Bowman peered over his shoulder, his mustache twitching. "But it does dessicate."

"If you use enough long enough."

"How about concentrated hydrochloric?"

"Same thing. Maybe a little more effective, but not enough to count."

"Okay. Next we try combinations. There's got to be something the wretched beast can't tolerate."

There was, of course.

Green Doctor Stone brought it to Jenkins as he was getting ready to turn in for a sleep period. Jenkins had checked to make sure double guards were posted in the hlorg's vicinity, and jolted them with Sleep-Not to keep them on their toes. All the same, he tied a length of stout cord around his ankle just to make sure he didn't do any sleepwalking. He was tying it to the bunk when Stone came in with a pan in his hand and a peculiar look on his face.

"Take a look at this," he said.

Jenkins looked at the sickly brown mass in the tray, and then up at Stone. "Where did you find it?"

"Down in the hold. Our hlorg has broken precedent. It's rejected something that it ate."

"Yeah. What is it?"

"I don't know. I'm taking it to Neelsen for paraffin sections. But I know what it looks like to me."

"Mm. I know." Jenkins felt sick. Stone headed up to the path lab, leaving the Red Doctor settled in his bunk.

Ten minutes later Jenkins sat bolt up-

right in the darkness. Frantically he untied himself and slid into his clothes. "Idiot!" he growled to himself. "Seventh son of a seventh son."

Five minutes later he was staring at the vats in Hrunta's laboratory. He found the one he was looking for. A pink blob of hlorg wiggled slowly around the bottom.

Jenkins drew a beaker of distilled water and added it to the fluid in the vat. It hissed and sputtered and sent up quantities of acrid steam. When the steam had cleared away, Jenkins peered in eagerly.

The pink thing in the bottom was turning a sickly violet. It had quit wiggling. As Jenkins watched, the violet color changed to mud grey, then to black. He prodded it with a stirring rod. There was no response.

With a whoop Jenkins buzzed Bowman and Stone. "We've got it!" he shouted to them when they appeared. "Look! Look at it!"

Bowman poked and probed and broke into a wide grin. The piece of hlorg was truly and sincerely dead. "It inactivates the enzyme system, and renders the base protoplasm vulnerable to anything that normally attacks it. What are we waiting for?"

They began tearing the laboratory apart, searching for the right bottles. The supply was discouragingly small, but there was some in stock. The three of them raced down the corridor for the hold where the hlorg was.

It took them three hours of angry work to exhaust the supply. They whittled chunks off the hlorg, tossed them in pans of the deadly fluid. With each slice they stopped momentarily to watch it turn violet, then black, as it died. The hlorg, dwindling in size, sensed the attack and slapped frantically at their ankles, sending out angry plumes of wet jelly, but they ducked and dodged and whittled some more. The hlorg quivered and gurgled and wept pinkish goo all over the floor, but it grew smaller and weaker with every whack.

"Hrunta must have spotted it and come down here alone," Jenkins panted between slices. "Maybe he slipped, lost his footing, I don't know."

They continued to work until the supply was exhausted. They had reduced the hlorg to a quarter its previous size. "Check the other labs, see if they have some more," said Stone.

"I already have," Bowman said. "They don't. This is it."

"But we haven't got it all killed. There's still." He pointed to the thing quailing in the corner.

"I know. We're licked, that's all. There isn't any more of the stuff on the ship."

They stopped and looked at each other suddenly. Then Jenkins said: "Oh, yes there is."

There was silence. Bowman looked at Stone, and Stone looked at Bowman. They both looked at Jenkins. "Oh, no. Sorry. I decline." Stone shook his head slowly.

"But we have to! There's no other way. If the enzyme system is inactivated, it's just protoplasm; there's no physi-

ological or biochemical reason."

"You know what you can do with your physiology and biochemistry," Bowman said succinctly. "You can also count me out." He left them and the hatchway clanged after him.

"Wally?"

"Yeah."

"It'll be months before we get back to Hospital Earth. We know how we can hold it in check until we get there."

"Yeah."

"Well?"

Green Doctor Wally Stone sighed. "Greater love hath no man," he said wearily. "We'd better go tell Neelsen, I guess."

Black Doctor Turvold Neelsen's answer was a flat, unequivocal no. "It's monstrous and preposterous. I won't stand for it. Nobody will stand for it."

"But you have the proof in your own hands," Jenkins said. "You saw the specimen that the Green Doctor brought you."

Neelsen hunched back angrily. "I saw it."

"And your impression of it? As a pathologist?"

"I fail to see how my impression applies one way or the other."

"Doctor, sometimes we have to face facts. Remember?"

"All right." Neelsen seemed to curl up into himself still further. "The specimen was stomach."

"Human stomach?"

"Human stomach."

"But the only human on this ship that doesn't have a stomach is Hrunta," said Jenkins.

"So the hlorg ate him."

"Most of him. Not quite all. It threw out the one part of him it couldn't eat. The part containing a substance that inactivated its enzyme system. Dilute hydrochloric acid, to be specific. We used the entire ship's supply, and cut the hlorg down to three-quarters size, but we need a continuous supply to keep it whittled down until we get home. And there's only one good, permanent, reliable source of dilute hydrochloric acid on board this ship."

The Black Doctor's face was purple. "I said no," he choked. "My answer stands."

The Red Doctor sighed and turned to Green Doctor Stone. "All right, Wally," he said.

(From the files of the Medical Disciplinary Board, Hospital Earth, op. cit.)

I am certain that you can see from the foregoing that a reasonable effort was made by Green Doctor Stone and myself to put the plan in effect peaceably and with full approval of our commander. It was our conviction, however, that the emergency nature of the circumstances required that it be done with or without his approval. Our subsequent success in containing the hlorg to at least reasonable and manageable proportions should bear out the wisdom of our decision.

Actually, it has not been as bad as one might think. It has been necessary to confine the crew to their quarters, and to restrain the Black Doctor forcibly, but

with liberal use of Happy-O we can occasionally convince ourselves that it is rare beefsteak, and the Green Doctor, our pro-tem cook has concocted several very tasty sauces, such as mushroom, onion, etc. We reduce the hlorg to half its size each day, and if thoroughly heated the chunks lie still on the plate for quite some time.

No physical ill effects have been noted, and the period of quarantine is recommended solely to allow the men an adequate period for psychological recovery.

I have only one further recommendation: that the work team from the Grey Service be recalled at once from their assignment on Mauki IV. The problem is decidedly not psychiatric, and it would be one of the tragedies of the ages if our excellent psychiatric service were to succeed in persuading the Maukivi out of their 'delusion'.

After all, Hospital Earth cannot afford to jeopardize a Contract—

Samuel B. Jenkins, Physician Grade VI Red Service GPP Ship Lancet (Attached GSS Mercy pro tem)

(Signed)s

The Psi Lodge had their ways and means of applying pressure, when pressure was needed. But the peculiar talent this fellow showed was one that even they'd never heard of...!

CARD ... TRICK

The game was stud. There were seven at the table, which makes for good poker. Outside of Nick, who banked the game, nobody looked familiar. They all had the beat look of compulsive gamblers, fogged over by their individual attempts at a poker face. They were a cagey-looking lot. Only one of them was within ten years of my age.

"Just in case, gamblers," the young one said. I looked up from stacking the chips I had just bought from Nick. The speaker was a skinny little guy with a sharp chin and more freckles than I'd like to have.

"If any one of you guys has any psi powers," the sharp-chinned gambler said sourly, "you better beat it. All gamblers here will recoup double their losses from any snake we catch using psi powers to beat the odds."

He shot a hard eyed look around a room not yet dimmed by cigar smoke. I got the most baleful glare, I thought. He didn't need to worry. I'd been certified Normal by an expert that very evening.

The expert was Dr. Shari King, whom I had taken to dinner before joining the game at Nick's. It had gotten to be a sort of weekly date—although this night had given signs of being the last one. For a while that spring, desoxyri-

bonucleic acid had begun to take second place in my heart. This is a pitiful admission for a biochemist to make—DNA should be the cornerstone of his life. But Shari was something rare—a gorgeous woman, if somewhat distant, who was thoroughly intelligent. She had already earned her doctorate, while I was still struggling with the tag ends of my thesis.

"Poker, Tex?" Shari had asked, when the waitress was bringing dessert. "Is this becoming a problem? You've played every night this week."

"No problem, Shari," I said. "I'm winning, and I see no point in not pocketing all that found money."

"Compulsive gambling is a sickness," she said, looking at me thoughtfully. She was wearing a shirtwaist and skirt that had the bright colors and fullness you associate with peasant dress.

"The only sick thing about me is my bank account," I grinned, relishing her dark, romantic quality. "I need the dough, Shari. I've got a thesis to finish if I ever want to get a job teaching."

Her thick eyebrows fluttered upward, a danger signal I had learned to look for. "That's a childish rationalization, Tex," she said with a lot more sharpness than I had expected. "There are certainly other ways to get money!"

"So I'm not as smart as you," I told her.

"Smart?" She didn't think I was tracking.

"I wasn't as shrewd as you were in picking my parents," I said. "Mine never had much, and left me less than that when they died."

She threw her spoon to the table. "I'll remind you of how silly these remarks sound, after you've hit a losing streak," she told me.

I laughed at that one. "I don't lose, Shari," I said. "And I don't intend to."

Her lashes veiled her violet eyes as she smiled and said more quietly, "Then you are in even worse trouble than I thought. I hear a lot about what happens to these strange people who never lose at cards or at dice or at roulette. Aren't you afraid of winding up in the gutter with your throat slit? Isn't that what happens to people with psi powers who gamble?" she insisted. "What's your trick, Tex? Do you stack the deck with telekinesis, or does precognition tell you what's about to be dealt?"

"That crack isn't considered very funny in Texas," I growled.

"Is it any more silly for me to think you might be a psi personality than for you to think you never lose at cards?" she nailed me.

I could feel my face getting red. "Damn it!" I started. "Nobody talks to a friend like that!"

"Pretty convincing proof!" Shari said tartly.

"Of what?"

"Of the fact that you aren't making any sense about this gambling kick you're on, Tex. You should have laughed my teasing off. Who would seriously suggest that you were a psi personality?" she demanded. "And most of all, with my background in psi, do you think I could be misled about it?"

I shrugged, trying to cool down. Shari's doctorate had been earned with a startling thesis on psi phenomena and psi personalities, and she had stayed on at Columbia as a research fellow in the field. In egghead circles, she rated as a psi expert, all right.

"Guess not," I said, trying to kill the subject.

She wasn't going to let it die. "I don't think you're a psi, Tex. You're a Normal!" The way she said it, it didn't sound like a compliment. "Worse than that," she insisted. "You're beginning to act like a compulsive gambler." She took a deep breath, and let me have the clincher: "I could never marry a gambler, Tex!"

"You've never been asked," I reminded her.

She had the last word. "Let's go!" she snapped.

Angry as I was about her acting as though I were a snake, I wished I could have thrown her certification that I was a Normal in the freckled face of the sharp-chinned gambler at Nick's later that night. After Shari's needling, I didn't take very kindly to his popping off with the Law of the Pack. It's understood wherever people gamble that psis aren't welcome.

Nick didn't like it any better than I did. "All right, Lefty," he said to the sharp-chinned gambler. "Calm down, huh, kid? What kinda game you think I run, huh?"

I didn't let the sour start spoil my game. I was lucky right from the start and hit big in several hands.

Lefty, the gambler who had yelped about psi powers at the game, dealt the tenth hand. He gave me the eight of spades in the hole. By the fourth card I had three other spades showing, which gave me four-fifths of a rare flush in stud poker. But by the fourth card Lefty had given himself a pair of jacks. That drove all the other gamblers to cover.

Lefty raised, of course, and it cost me five hundred bucks to see my fifth card. It was a classic kind of stand-off in stud, and the waiter stopped with his tray of drinks to press in among the other kibitzers and watch the pay-off.

Lefty shucked out the last two cards carelessly, as if they didn't really matter. His own fifth card made no difference—his jacks already had a busted flush beaten. His smile was just a little too sharp as he tossed me my last card face up and reached for the pot with the same left-handed gesture.

I took the poker panetella out of my teeth. "All blue," I said, turning up my hole card with the other hand.

Lefty threw the unused part of the deck to the center of the table. "That does it, you snake!" he swore at me.

It took a second for his accusation to sink in. I started across the table after him. If they hadn't stopped me, I would have torn his lying throat out. Funny, but there were kibitzers on my shoulders before I could rise an inch out of my chair.

"Down in Texas you could get shot for a crack like that, Lefty!" I said. I guess I really yelled it.

"And in New York you can, and

probably will, get your rotten throat slit for a trick like the one you just pulled," he replied. He turned to the other gamblers, most of whom had their hands on the edge of the table, ready to jump to their feet if it got any rougher.

"I stacked the deck this last deal," he said coolly. He held a palm up at their surprised mutter. "Tex's fifth card was stacked to be a heart, gamblers. You saw him get a spade and take the pot. I won't sit at the same table with a guy that can do that. Telekinesis has no place in poker."

"Pretty near as bad as stacked decks," one of the gamblers rasped. But the others weren't with him. I only had to take one look at Nick's face.

I stood up slowly, and the hands on my shoulders didn't hold me down any longer. "Lefty says he stacked the deck," I told them. "I say he lies. You know there's nothing to choose between our statements. Lefty is a cheap grandstander, and I'll settle with him myself. Nick, I won't embarrass you tonight. This isn't your fault. But I'll be here tomorrow night, and you had better be glad to see me!"

"Sure, Tex," he said uncomfortably, rising with me. "Take my seat, Shorty," he directed one of the kibitzers. He walked around to grab me by the elbow and steer me as far away from Lefty's truculent face as he could. At least the sharp-chinned little rat had quit the game, too. Both of us had left our chips on the table.

Nick wanted me to leave. "Pay me off," I insisted. He said yes a lot quicker than I thought he would. The other gamblers could have squawked that my chips should go into the next pot, but apparently none of them did.

Lefty sidled out as Nick was paying me off. "Wait outside for me," I said to him.

"Why not?" he said, sticking his chin out at me and walking out.

Nick grabbed me again. "Don't get hot, Tex," he warned me. "I don't want a killing on my own sidewalk. Take it some place else, huh, kid?"

"Sure," I said.

There wasn't any danger Lefty would hang around. I was big enough to break him in two, which is exactly what I planned if I caught up with him.

It had been dark for some hours by the time I hit the street and waved for a skim-copter. Nick's games start late.

"You asked me to wait," somebody said. I spun around and saw Lefty standing in the alleyway beside the building. I went for him, charging hard. He scuttled back into the alley, out of what little light there was that far downtown. Just as I reached for him, somebody slugged me in the gut. I went down on a knee, gasping. I hadn't seen his sidekick—the alley was pretty dark. I heard Lefty's breath suck in sharply as I came up out of my crouch, diving for him. After all, it was only pain, something inside my head. It wasn't as though I had been really crippled. My fingers clawed at his jacket, and would have held him. But the other guy grabbed at my ankle and threw me down on the slippery cobbles again.

I came up slower that time. I'd bunged up my kneecap more than I wanted to think about. Lefty was still out of reach. I called him a name that was always good for a fight in Texas, and started after him, but slower than before. I wasn't fast enough to avoid the hard thing that rammed against my spine. Even down in Texas, a gun in the back freezes you up.

Lefty was all guts now that I was hung up on the gun barrel. It might as well have been a meat hook.

"I warned you not to use psi in the game!" he snapped. "Now you'll have to talk to Pete."

"One of us isn't going to live through this," I promised him, starting to reach for his throat. The gun jabbed a reminder to watch my manners.

"Do you come quietly?" Lefty asked shrilly. "Or do we—?"

The sudden shrillness of his voice scared me more than anything else. He was worked up worse than I was. "Quietly," I conceded, trying to get some saliva to flow again. The pressure against my spine eased off.

Lefty stepped out of the alley to the curb and flagged down a cruising 'copter. He made me get in first, which gave me a chance to turn, when I sat down, and see who had been holding the gun on me from behind. The gunman had sure drifted in one awful hurry. There wasn't a soul except Lefty around.

He hopped in after me. The turbine howled as the driver gunned us up on the air cushion and sent us skimming away. The trip lasted only four or five minutes through the thinning traffic of late evening. We pulled up in front of a brownstone house in the upper Eighties that reared up four stories among a string of three-story neighbors.

I limped to the top of the steps after Lefty. He let us in with a key. We were in a dimly-lit hall that had a staircase against its left wall and an open door at its right, leading into a darkened room.

A tall skinny girl was sitting about a third of the way up the carpeted flight of steps. Her face was drawn out to a point by a long, thin nose. "Here they are," she called up the stairway, showing braces on her teeth. She stood up and came down the hall. She was clad in a shortie wrapper that showed off her race-horse legs.

"Billy Joe," she said to Lefty. "I told them you were coming."

"Hi, Pheola," he said. "Good for you." He sounded pleased.

There were steps above, and two others joined us. First came a short square man with gray hair and bushy gray eyebrows. He was wrapped up in a flannel robe that had once been maroon and was now rusty with age and wear. It only served to confirm that he had just been yanked out of bed. He hadn't bothered to put anything on his bare feet or to comb his hair. A pretty wild looking old man.

Behind him stumped a chunky woman, crowding fifty. She was in a worse state of dishabille. She hadn't quite made it to bed and was still in her slip. Her stockings had been unhitched from her garters and hung in slack trans-

parency around her fat calves, like the sloughed-off skin of a snake.

"I told you," Pheola said to the gray-haired man.

"It's nice that you're right once in a while," he said in a scratchy, sleepy voice, walking past her to switch on the ceiling of the room on the right side of the hall.

She didn't like that. Lefty stopped her reply. "Will it be PC?" he asked her.

"No," she said.

"You missed that one," Lefty said.

"Didn't neither!"

"Well, sit in with us and see," he suggested.

"What for?" she asked. "I know what's going to happen in there. You'll be along to bed right soon, darlin' Billy!"

He looked over at me. "Go on in, Tex," he said.

"Darlin' Billy!" I sneered.

"Don't pay any attention to her," he said. "She's in another space-time continuum." I pointedly ogled the girl's pretty legs going up the stairs and whistled softly. "My wife," he said, blushing. "A powerful PC, or one day will be."

"You're kidding," I said. His arm on my elbow pushed me into the lighted room.

It had been the front parlor of the old brownstone in its prime, and was now fixed up as an office. The place held an executive desk with several buttons and enough other controls to put it in orbit. There were a number of cushioned straight-backed chairs and a comfortable leather couch under the window. Only the fact that it was getting on toward midnight made me willing to believe that the couple who had walked down the stairs expected to be taken seriously.

"This is George Robertson, the poker whiz," Lefty said briefly to the two sleepy heads. "They call him Tex. Tex, this is Peter Maragon, Grand Master of the Lodge."

The gray-haired man gave me a tired nod. "I imagine you're a pretty angry young man, Mr. Robertson," he said in his scratchy voice. I started to tell him quite a little about how I felt, but he held up his hand. "I've had a hard day," he complained. "And I got out of bed solely to adjudicate your case. Now, this will go a lot more quickly if you listen." He smacked his lips a couple times as if he wondered where he had left his partial plate. I hoped he had swallowed it. "Sit down, sit down," he said irritably, pointing at the chair across the desk from him.

I debated it, but took the chair, grinding my teeth.

"You aren't stupid, or you wouldn't be a scientist," he said, revealing that he knew a lot more about me than I did about him. "Let's start out with a couple facts."

He pointed a gnarled finger at Lefty. "Wally Bupp stacked a deck of cards on you tonight," he said gruffly. "What you don't know is that he stacked them with telekinesis. He's a TK."

"A snake!" I gasped.

"Watch your lip!" Maragon

croaked. "Everybody in this room is a psi. 'Snake' is a dirty word around here, Mr. Robertson. Mr. Bupp has a special aversion to it."

"What's the purpose...?" I began hotly.

"Hah!" Maragon barked. "A good word!" He cackled a laugh at me. "Purpose. Exactly, Mr. Robertson. Well, the Lodge has a purpose, and you'll act a lot more sensibly if you know it."

"You," he said to me. "Are a TK."

"You," I yelled right back. "Are a liar!"

He ignored me completely. "We can't afford to have you gambling and cheating Normals," he went on. "One of the Lodge's fundamental rules is that no psi may use his powers to the detriment of Normals. Lefty's big scene at Nick's fixed it so you won't be welcome in a big-time poker game anywhere in town. We did that deliberately. And we're telling you to quit gambling, as of this minute."

"You say you are a TK," I interrupted.

"Somewhat," he said. "I have psi powers, but I'm not mainly a TK."

"Whatever your powers are," I said. "They don't make you supermen immune from the laws of libel. If you or anybody I can catch breathes one false word about my being a snake, you'll be on the receiving end of the roughest lawsuit you ever heard of!"

"The silliness of that statement will occur to you in a while," he said dryly. "And truth is a defense against a claim of libel. But to get back to purpose. Our second purpose tonight is to get it through your thick head, Mr. Robertson, that the Lodge insists on its right to control your actions insofar as they involve the use of your psi powers. We mean business, Mr. Robertson, and before you are through with our heartless Mr. Bupp tonight, you'll know it. That's all that's behind our little charade."

He came to a stop and took a deep breath.

"I'm going to make one statement and rest on it," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and level.

He shrugged. "Your turn," he said.

"I'm a Normal," I said. "I flatly deny that I have the slightest shred of psi power. I accuse that freckled snake over there of lying deliberately. I'll make him pay for it, and he'll be lucky if it isn't with his blood."

"That's all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

He laughed harshly and grinned over at Lefty. "Some of you maverick psis scream like a gelded porker," he said. "I figgered you'd tell me we'd cost you a fortune in prospective poker winnings, to say the least."

My stomach dropped. I hadn't thought of that, not as much as I should have. It was my only income! "Something a darn sight more important than money is involved," I said.

"Maybe you aren't such a bad guy," he decided. He looked over at the woman standing silently in her slip beside his desk, her bare arms folded over her ample bosom.

"How about it, Milly?" he asked her.

She shrugged. "He believes what he says," she told him. "He honestly doesn't think he has any psi powers."

"That mitigates the affair," Maragon said. "Still, our purpose demands an object lesson. I have to fine you, Mr. Robertson. You've broken one of our rules by using TK to stack a poker deck. Because you weren't aware of it, though, half of your fine will be remitted if you join the Lodge within a week. Accordingly I assess you ... uh, how much, Milly?" he asked.

"He's got eight thousand and some in his breast pocket," she said with fiendish accuracy. "Every penny he has in the world."

"Assess you eight thousand dollars," Maragon concluded. He got wearily to his feet, and started to pad past me toward the door. "Mr. Bupp will collect," he said. The woman followed him, her hose hanging down around her ankles, and climbed the stairs stolidly behind him.

Lefty, whom Maragon had called Wally Bupp, walked around behind the desk and took the swivel chair that the older man had just vacated. "I'll take the eight thousand now, Tex," he said, poking his chin at me belligerently.

"You'll take four," I said, getting my feet under me.

He frowned. "Four?" he repeated.

"Four knuckles," I gritted and started for him. The gun barrel rammed me in the kidney, harder than it had in the alley. They'd smuggled in some protection. I really slammed on the brakes, halfway across the desk. Lefty hadn't bothered to flinch, but sat there with his legs crossed, looking idly at his fingernails.

"Look behind you," he said.

I did. The gun eased off my kidney as I turned. There wasn't anybody there.

"TK," Lefty said. "I also used it to trip you up when you went for me in the alley, after I'd TK'd a left right in your gut. You're a hard guy to stop, Tex. But don't overdo it."

"Mere pain never stopped a guy who really meant it!" I went for him again.

Then it hit me. A deep and sickening pain throbbed from my breastbone down my left arm. The lights started to dim, and I sagged down on the desk.

"How'd that feel?" Lefty asked, apparently not expecting an answer. "I clamped your coronary artery shut for a few seconds. A post-mortem would never be able to tell it from the real thing if I held down tight."

His grin had a viciousness in it I hadn't seen before. He held out his hand. I struggled erect and handed my wallet to him. He only took out the big bills, and tossed it back across the desk to me. "Thanks," he said. "You'll get half of this back if you decide to join the Lodge within a week."

"What's all this about a Lodge?" I tried weakly. "What Lodge?"

"Why, this Lodge," Lefty said, waving a hand around loosely. "It's an organization of folks with psi powers. Guys like you and me, Tex."

"I'm no TK!" I growled. "I didn't manipulate those cards in any way."

"Funny you say that," he said, looking interested and leaning his elbows on the desk. "You're right. I hadn't actually bothered to stack the deck, Tex. Just kept a light TK touch on it to see if you were moving cards. You weren't, but you were hitting them right all the time. I haven't had time to tell Maragon the boys on the Crap Patrol were wrong. It wasn't telekinesis, Tex. It was precognition. You're a PC, Tex." He stood up and pointed toward the door. I was shaking so badly from the heart attack the snake had induced that I got up helplessly and allowed him to steer me out by the elbow.

"Remember," he said at the head of the steps that led down to the street. "You've got a week to make up your mind about joining the Lodge. In the meantime, don't gamble."

"Great," I said bitterly. "You sapped me down and rolled me for my poke, or the next thing to it. And now you tell me not to get in a game and try to get whole again. Why should you care?"

"You don't listen," he said sourly. "Look, psis are supermen, in spite of your sneers. And whether you like it or not, Tex, you've got some psi powers. Normals resent, fear and hate us. We can't afford to have you make a killing at a poker table and then get exposed as a 'snake.' We psis are a tiny minority. We all get blamed for things any one of us does."

"I'm a Normal," I said, a little hollowly.

"You're more fortunate than that," he assured me. "Just so you understand the origin and purpose of the Lodge. We find strength in union, strength to resist the pressure of the majority. And membership in the Lodge gives us control—control over psis like you who might bring the wrath of the Normal majority down on us by their shortsightedness."

I shook my head. "You don't have to dress it up like this," I protested. "This is blackmail or extortion, I'm not sure which. I'm not joining anything you bunch of creeps are a part of."

"You won't find that practical," he said, turning to go back inside. "And remember: stay away from cards."

You're supposed to have nightmares at night. I had mine the whole next day. No, I wasn't a TK, Lefty had said. I was a PC. You don't have anemia, Tex. It's leukemia!

I made a farce of trying to get some work done in the lab. After letting the third test tube slip through my fingers and shatter on the lab bench, I gave it up. How would you have acted if you had gotten that kind of news? That first gut-twisting admission that you really may be a snake! Then sharp awareness of what it means. A guillotine couldn't cut you off more sharply from Normal humanity. But the spirit struggles and refuses to accept it. You can't be a snake!

"Take action!" I said aloud, getting a worried look from my lab assistant, busy mopping up my last shattered culture. "Don't spin around like this. Do something!"

I did the only thing I could think of, and dialed Shari at her laboratory. She refused to accept the call at first. Finally

she tore herself away from a "delicate experiment" long enough to look at me angrily in the screen.

"We don't have anything to say to each other," she said coldly. "There are delicate experiments—"

"Can you test me for psi powers?" I interrupted.

"Whatever for?"

"To settle whether I have any," I snapped. "It's important to me."

"Not necessary," she said. "Do you think I'd be successful in the psi field if I weren't sensitive to this sort of thing? Don't worry, Tex. You're a Normal."

"Thanks," I said. "So you've told me. Now prove it to my satisfaction."

"We shut up shop at five o'clock," she said. "I'll be here for about an hour after that. My dinner date isn't until seven."

"Bet he doesn't gamble," I said, trying to win a little sympathy.

"You bet he doesn't" she sniffed.

Shari's laboratory was nothing more than a large windowless office that could be cut into two sound-proof parts with a movable partition. She had a whopper desk with full controls and other evidences of academic pelf. On a table against the short wall was her apparatus—if that's what you call decks of cards, a roulette wheel, a set of Rhine ESP cards, several dice and, so help me, a crystal ball.

Shari stood up behind her desk when I came in. It was something of a shock to find that her colorful peasant getup was antiseptically sheathed in a white laboratory coat. She was sure dressed for dirtier work than she would ever have to do in that lab.

Her first look at me was one of surprise, but it softened to one of concern, which might have been cheering on some other occasion. "What has happened, Tex?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, keeping calm. "Not a thing."

"Outside of seeing a ghost, eh?" she said. "Stop grinding your teeth like that. You'll give me the creeps. Sit down. Sit down! Do you hear me? Relax!"

I guess I found the chair across from her at the desk. "Do I have psi powers?" I asked her. "Either TK or PC? Test me, Shari."

"What happened?" she insisted.

I shook my head. "I'd rather not talk about it—not until I know the result of your test," I said.

Shari thought about it for a while, tapping her desk with an irritated finger, and finally got a set of cards from the lab table against the wall. She shuffled them slowly on her desk blotter. "Cards are your strong point," she observed. "If you have any psi powers, they're most likely to show up with cards. I take it you will do your utmost to be right?"

"Who would double-cross himself?" I said tightly.

"Most people," Shari said. "When it comes to psi. But we'll assume, for a starter, that you are on the level." She stacked the cards in her hand. "We'll keep it simple," Shari suggested. "I'll deal the cards one at a time. All you have to do is tell me whether the next card

will be red or black. Fair?"

"Sure," I said. "Deal!"

She was a lousy dealer. Or maybe it was because it was a one-handed operation. She was scoring my hits and misses with the little counter in her other hand.

She ran the deck ten times for me. I got thirty-eight right on my best attempt and thirty-seven wrong on my worst. In total, of five hundred and twenty chances, I was right on two hundred and seventy-three, or fifty-two point two per cent of the time, according to Shari's slide rule.

"Oh, no," I said dismally. "I do have a little edge on the cards!"

"As a statistician, you'll make a great biochemist," Shari said, putting the deck away. "That would only be true if I hadn't let you see your hits and misses as each deal proceeded. You made succeeding guesses in the knowledge of what had already been dealt. Actually, your score was below average for trained observers without psi powers." She heaved a sigh, which somehow seemed to be of relief. "And now, you crazy cowpoke," she said, "tell me what this is all about."

"I'm not a psi?" I demanded.

"Not if you were really trying," she said. "Were you?"

"You think I want to be a psi?" I demanded. I told her all that had happened the night before from the time Lefty had accused me of being a snake until he had let me out of the brownstone house and warned me against gambling.

Guess how Shari reacted. A big nothing!

"Well?" I asked, as she sat silent with her elbows on the edge of her desk and her chin propped up on her knuckles.

"You're really quite naive, aren't you, Tex?" she asked me. "Let me give you an objective statement of what happened to you last night."

She counted these things off on her fingers: "You won some money at poker. A gambler said you used TK to win. He took your winnings, and then some, away from you as the price of silence. He warned you not to gamble any more. He claimed he was part of an organization of psi personalities. Is that a fair statement?"

"Except for one thing," I said. "He used his psi powers on me in a pretty dramatic fashion."

"Try Occam's razor," she suggested.

She was getting insulting. "All right," I growled, feeling my face get red. "Prefer the simpler explanation, if you can find one. I was prodded in the back, both in the alley and in the office at the brownstone house. Something hit me in the gut and tripped me up. I had a heart seizure. What's simpler than TK in accounting for the fact this was done without a soul around?"

"I suppose I shouldn't be critical of you," she said. "It's not your field and you haven't been exposed to the lengths to which charlatans go, just to prove they are supermen. The simpler explanation is that there was someone else in the alley, carefully dressed in dull black

to stay invisible in the darkness. The second prodding of a gun in your spine was pure suggestion—you'd been so well-sold by that time you were ready to believe anything."

"And my heart attack?"

"I can think of ten poisons that would give you the symptoms," Shari said. "And don't tell me you let nothing pass your lips!" she burst out hotly as I started to speak. "I suppose you've never had a spray hypodermic? You'd never have felt it. Don't you see why they went to all this trouble?"

"Honestly," I said. "I can't. I'm simply not that important to anyone in the world."

"You're not," she said dryly. "But your eight thousand dollars was. I'd say if people can steal that much money and convince the victim he shouldn't go to the police, it was worth their while. You're not very likely to advertise the claim that you're a psi, are you?"

"No," I admitted.

"And," she said wearily, standing up. "There's always the angle that they'll con you by letting you into their imaginary 'Lodge' and extract some kind of dues out of you in return for keeping quiet about your so-called psi powers when you gamble. That would serve you right," she concluded.

"For what?" I demanded, beginning to feel pretty icy.

"Being such an easy mark, for one thing," Shari said. "And for seriously thinking that you might be a PC! That, I must confess, I find the most comical of all. You, Tex, a PC!"

"Why is that funnier than being a TK?" I demanded, getting up.

She waved her hand impatiently. "We see a little TK here in the lab right along," she said. "At least, there are those who seem to have a small genuine edge on the cards that we can explain no other way. It's small, but apparently exists. But precognition? That's not simply mechanical or kinetic, like TK. PC is something terrifyingly different." Her voice hushed as she said it. "It's a kind of sensitivity that has nothing to do with mere kinetics. It defies time!" She looked back at me. "I simply find it comical that you thought of yourself as sensitive to that degree."

"So I've been a fool," I mused.

"In a word, yes. You're a Normal. They suckered you, if you want the jargon."

"Wait till tonight!" I seethed, beginning to feel my anger grow as my fear dwindled. "Let them try to pin the psi label on me! I'll call their bluff!"

The TV-phone on Shari's desk rang, and she pressed the Accept key.

"Let me speak with Tex," a familiar aggressive voice said. It didn't sound as if it would stand for much nonsense.

Shari still had another look of surprise in her. "For you," she said, arching her romantic eyebrows, and turning the instrument around so I was facing the 'scope and screen.

Sure enough, it was Wally Bupp. "Don't do it, Tex," he warned me.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't play tonight. It won't be practical. We mean business."

"So do the laws of libel," I said. "One crack about my having psi powers—"

"Yeah, yeah," he interrupted. "You told us about the lawsuit," he said. "You've got six more days." I could see his hand come up to cut the image.

"Hey!" I said. "How'd you know where to reach me?"

His sharp face split in that vicious grin. "I forgot to tell you," he said. "Maragon is a clairvoyant, too." The image faded.

"See what I mean?" I said shakily to Shari. "They sure talk a good game. I didn't tell a soul I was coming here. How'd they catch me?"

"Occam's razor," she said. "How many wrong numbers did they try first? Come back to earth!"

"That snake Lefty still worries me," I admitted, going to the door. "Shari, I know I've acted nuts, but they nearly got me to flip! Thanks for helping me. I couldn't have stood it to know I was a snake. You got my mind back on the track again."

"Not enough to keep from going right back to the poker table," she observed.

There didn't seem any point to telling her how badly I needed the dough. Anyway, I had to prove a point. I was a Normal. I left.

There were already seven at the table when I got to Nick's after dinner. He didn't want to deal me in.

"Seven's a full table, huh, Tex?" he said.

"Not for stud, it isn't," I told him. "You can deal to ten gamblers."

"Dealer's choice tonight," he protested, while some of the gamblers eyed me curiously. "Can't deal to more than seven for three-card draw."

"I told you where I stood on this thing last night," I snapped.

"All right," Nick said warmly. "So maybe I'd like the whole stink to cool down a little, huh?"

"Not with my dough in it, Nick!" I told him, being pretty free with something I didn't have much of any more. "You'll deal me in tonight or I'll find another banker!"

A gink with a long, scrawny neck put down his highball and rose from the table. "Gosh, fellows," he said. "I'm sort of a fifth wheel around here, I guess. Here, neighbor," he insisted. "Take my place." He was all grins and teeth and bobbed his head around with a rural awkwardness.

"You don't have to do that, Snead," Nick started to say.

"Just as soon kibitz," he insisted, drawing up a chair behind me as I took his seat. "You don't mind, neighbor?" he asked anxiously. I shook my head and yanked out my much-depleted wallet to pay for chips. It took all that the Lodge hadn't.

Four hands were enough. On the first, at stud, I had aces back to back and picked up a pair of sevens on the next two cards. Two pair, aces high, will win about ninety-nine out of a hundred stud hands. I chewed down on the panetella in my teeth and bet them like I had them. The tilt of my cigar showed just a little too much confidence as a way to con-

vince some of the gamblers that I was bluffing. It must have been a good act, for three of them stayed with me all the way. None of them had much showing, and regardless of what their hole cards were, by the time we had our fifth cards, I had them all beaten.

It was raise against raise, but somebody finally called, and I turned over my ace in the hole. "Aces and sevens, gamblers," I grinned, reaching for the pot.

"I see the sevens," a fat-faced man across the table said around his cigar. "But what's this jazz about aces?"

So help me Hannah, my hole card was a two! I tried to cover it up. "You'll have to admit I bet them like aces," I said.

Somebody laughed, but not very hard.

I paid mighty close attention to what I was dealt the next hand, and turned down a drink to make sure I was cold sober. Unfortunately, I got all screwed up over what one of the other gamblers had. It had been a bunch of spinach when I'd been betting my pair against it, but it was one good-looking straight when he flipped the card in the hole.

The third hand I dropped out before the fourth card. After a gambler raked in that pot, my kibitzer asked me: "How much do you have to have on the first three cards to stay in the pot?"

"Any pair would convince me," I said. "Why?"

"What was the matter with the kings you had showing?" he asked. They were still on the table in front of me, king of hearts and king of clubs.

I scarcely dared bet the fourth hand. We had switched to three-card draw. I discarded two small diamonds, keeping a pair of nines and an ace for a kicker. On the draw I got one card that claimed to be the fourteen of eagles and one on which there was a message reading: "These hallucinations are sent to you with the courtesy of the Manhattan Chapter of the Lodge. Are you finding it practical?"

I threw the hand in and stood up, shaking. "Since when don't you bet a full house?" my kibitzer demanded, after the hand was won. He picked up what I had thrown in. The fourteen of eagles turned out to be a nine, and the card with the hallucination message the other ace.

"Got to confuse the other bettors," I said. "One of the fundamentals of poker."

There really weren't enough chips left in front of me to bother cashing in. I just left them lying there and wandered down to the street, flat broke.

Wally Bupp was right. I hadn't found it practical. All of a sudden I saw that it really didn't matter whether I were a psi or not. The important question had always been whether Lefty and the others were psis. If so, they might be on the level about my psi powers—which meant I was right back being a snake again. And if they weren't, it was a simple case of blackmail, which at least let me rejoin the human race. On that basis, I was in tough shape. Occam's razor has no answer for hallucinations. Either you've had them or you hadn't. I had. Nobody would change my mind on

that score. That made Snead, and presumably Lefty, a psi. And me, too.

But—what if they were mistaken? Shari's tests looked conclusive to me. I saw that as the only way out. I had to insist on a test in their presence. And that meant I had to get in touch with Wally Bupp.

My kibitzer came stalking out of the building, gangling and gawky. "Didn't mean to spoil your luck, neighbor," he said.

"Don't give it a second thought, Snead," I said.

"Call me Mortimer," he said. "You mind a word of advice, neighbor?" he asked, bobbing his head around and grinning in a self-conscious way. "Next time, bet that fourteen. Highest card in the deck. Beats all the others!"

"You lousy snake!" I gasped. I'd learned better than to take a poke at him. Lefty had taught me my lesson on that one. Snead might turn out to be a TK as well as a hallucinator, and I wanted no more heart attacks.

He handed me a card. "There'll be somebody at this number all night, neighbor. Gamblers Anonymous."

He faded off down the dark street. The card merely said:

"Manhattan Chapter NO 5-5600"

Shari must have had a swell time at dinner with some guy who didn't gamble, because she didn't come home until nearly midnight. I know because I dialed her apartment every ten minutes until I got her face on the screen.

She was still dressed for dinner and had a sort of tiara over her thick tresses. "What is it?" she said.

"I'm not a psi?" I demanded.

"No!" she said. "Hasn't this gone—?"

"Well, then, am I crazy?" I cut in on her.

Her lips compressed. "It's a lot more likely," she decided. "Why?"

"Either I'm nuts," I told her. "Or those characters really are psis." She was reaching up to cut the image when I caught her interest. "Is there such a thing as a psi who can induce hallucinations?" I demanded.

"No." Flatly.

"They've got me sold that they can do it," I said. "What does Occam's razor say about that?"

"You idiot!" she exploded. "They don't believe you are a PC any more than I do!" She was sure sensitive about my having any precognition!

"O.K.," I said. "Then you make them eat it. Aren't you the one who knows all about exposing charlatans?"

That was the right button. "Certainly," Shari said.

"I'll pick you up in ten minutes," I said.

"Now? Midnight?"

"This is the pay-off," I said, and cut the image. I dialed the number Snead had given me.

"Manhattan Chapter," the Operator cartoon said.

"This is George Robertson," I said. "Mortimer Snead told me there'd be somebody there to talk to me. Maybe Lefty."

"Snead?" the cartoon said, frowning. "No one here by that—Oh! Wait a moment. Dr. Walter Bupp will talk to you," the cartoon said, and Wally's face appeared on the screen.

"It wasn't practical," I admitted.

"Six days early," he observed.

"Nuts," I said. "Look, you've got me convinced you are a psi. That Snead puts on a terrific show."

"Snead?" he frowned. "Oh!" He laughed. "Yeah," he agreed condescendingly. "He's red hot, every now and then."

"But you haven't sold me that I'm a PC," I growled. "I've been tested. I'm not. Now I want you to get off my back. You and the rest of them! Lay off!"

He shook his head. "The Lodge acts unilaterally on this," he said soberly. "You've got psi powers. You'll accept our direction in their use. Or else, Tex."

"All I ask is a fair test," I said desperately. "Under laboratory conditions."

He gave me an address. "Come any time," he said.

"That's me walking in," I told him.

Shari had to pay off the 'copter when we got there. It wasn't the brownstone I had seen the night before. This place was a medium-sized office building, say a hundred stories or so, quite new. There was no identification on its front other than the street number. The Directory in the silent and unpopulated lobby was names, all names. But Dr. Walter Bupp was one of them, in 7704. Shari and I rode the elevator to seventy-seven in chilly silence.

The corridor was dim, with its lights on night-time setting. Stronger light came from an open door quite a way down the hall. It had to be Bupp's office, and it was.

Wally certainly wasn't surprised to see Shari. He shook hands with her briefly, pushing his sharp chin out at her in his gamecock fashion. "Your mate?" he asked me.

"Certainly not," she told him. "We're ... uh ... colleagues at the University."

"That's not what Pheola says," he told her sourly, pointing to chairs we could take.

"Pheola?" Shari questioned.

"A powerful PC," Wally said. "She predicted you would accompany Tex tonight."

"Oh, really," Shari said scathingly.

"I was there," I told her. "She really did."

"Let's not be diverted by sideshows," Shari said. "We're here to measure the psi powers of Tex Robertson, not to talk over the reputed clairvoyance of some dim and misty character."

"Precognition," Wally corrected her. "Stick around, Dr. King. Pheola will be down a little later. She thinks Tex is something special."

That was not going to make a good interchange, so I cut in. "Dr. King is a professional in this field—" I started.

Wally waved a disgusted hand. "We know all about Dr. King and her field," he said. "Proving that psi powers don't exist, right, Dr. King?"

Shari bristled. It was hard to stay friendly in any talk with Bupp. "You know my field," she said, about twenty degrees below zero. "I accept any and all evidence, regardless what it proves! There's a lot of talk about psi powers, but precious little that can ever be detected under laboratory conditions!"

"Oh, well," Wally Bupp grinned. "That's not so strange. All members of the Lodge are cautioned to stay away from laboratories. You've been testing Normals. What do you expect for results?"

"Then you show me!" she stormed.

"Go on with you," he grinned. "I thought it was Tex's powers you wanted tested. Mine are irrelevant."

"I thought so," she said triumphantly. "Charlatan!"

For a moment the grin flickered off his face and I tensed to catch Shari if she should start to drop. But I guess he thought better of it.

"Some other time," he said. "Let's get this over with. Make it simple. You may have some statistical objections to my technique tonight, but I'm not looking for fringe effects. If this hot-eyed swain of yours is any good at all, he'll bat a thousand." He got a deck of cards out of his desk drawer and fanned it out face up so that he could pluck the two of spades and the two of hearts from the deck. The rest he put back in his desk.

He put his hands under the desk, with the two cards in them, produced the cards again, face down, and laid them in a thin stack on the desk before all of us.

"What's on top?" he said. "Red or black?"

"How will you score?" Shari insisted. He scowled at her and tossed a squeeze counter across the desk.

"You score," he said. "It really isn't necessary. Tex will either be right all the time or it won't matter."

But before I could call the top card, the office door opened behind us. I looked around, expecting Pheola. Instead it was Milly with the down, down hose. Only this time she was decently dressed in a dark two-piece suit and wore make-up. She certainly was no more talkative than before, nor did Wally introduce her. Shari was perfectly equal to the occasion and looked through Milly with composure. This takes about three generations of overbreeding.

"Try it," Wally insisted. "What's on top?"

I hit it. Then I missed it. Then I hit three in a row. It wasn't fast work, because Wally hid the cards under his desk after each guess, shuffled the two cards around and then laid them before me again. This went on for about twenty minutes. At that point Shari spoke.

"That makes exactly three hundred tries," she said, looking at the counter in her hand. "Have you been keeping score, Mr. Bupp?"

"I thought you were."

"So I was," she snapped, throwing up her tiaraed head. He sure brought out the worst in people. "Tex has been right exactly one hundred and fifty times. He's never been more than five

tries to the good in the whole series.''

''Interesting,'' Wally said.

I took my first decent breath in the day. ''This ought to let me off the hook,'' I said to him. ''Are you convinced?''

He shrugged. ''How about it, Milly?'' he asked.

''A random sample,'' she said. ''He doesn't want to score. He didn't try.''

Shari was ready for that one. She turned and spoke to Milly: ''You have ways of knowing what Tex was thinking?'' she asked sweetly.

''Yes.''

''Name any three!'' Shari lashed at her furiously. The solid woman wasn't the least bit bowled over.

''Read his mind,'' she said matter-of-factly. ''Just like I can tell that you're getting ready to screech 'Charlatan!' at me, and like you think I got a cast-iron girdle and homely shoes. Well, they're comfortable, dearie, which is more than you can say for those high-heeled slippers of yours. That left little toe of yours is killing you, dearie!''

Shari's lips moved, but her mouth was as empty of sound as her face was of blood. Milly had hit the bull's-eye.

''Everybody relax a moment,'' Wally said. ''Tell me, Dr. King, what's your attitude toward PC?''

''I don't have any!'' she snapped. ''It's a phenomenon. I have as much attitude toward it as I do toward osmosis or toward peristalsis. None.''

''Would you consider a person fortunate to possess the power of precognition?'' Wally asked her.

Shari's head came up. ''If there were such a thing,'' she said, much more quietly. ''Yes. I should imagine that precognition would be a powerful talent.''

''If you have no emotional bias against psi as such,'' he went on smoothly, ''you'd be happy for Tex if he were a PC.''

Her eyebrows drew together. She looked at me, veiling her violet eyes as if to hide her thoughts from us. ''I would consider Tex quite fortunate. But only if you could show that such a thing really existed,'' she said more loudly.

''How about you, Tex?'' Wally asked me.

''Nuts,'' I said. ''You can't make me like the idea of being a snake, no matter how you dress it up.'' I shook my head. ''Psi powers are the mark of a diseased mind, for my dough. They're pure poison. What have they ever done for you?'' I insisted rudely.

''Made me a surgeon,'' he said.

''Never!'' Shari said hotly.

''Ask Tex,'' Wally suggested. ''He felt me put a lift on his coronary artery. I'm a TK surgeon—I've got enough TK to put clamps on inaccessible arteries and feel out mechanical disorders of the body. Check it. I'm on the staff at Universal Hospital.''

''And what are you doing here?'' she argued.

''Meeting my obligation to the Lodge,'' he said. ''This is where I got my training, right in this building.''

''I thought that brownstone house was the Lodge,'' I said.

''No,'' he said. ''That's just the Grand

Master's residence. The Lodge provides quarters for its brass. This building is the real chapter house."

He heaved a long sigh and dug into his drawer again. "You can beat it, Milly," he said. "Thanks."

"I know," she told him from the door. She had started out long before he spoke. Impressive stuff, but it got a sniff from Shari.

What Wally got out of his desk had a refreshing shape and color. It was oblong. It was green. It was money. It was, for a fact, a stack of one thousand dollar bills.

Wally shuffled the two cards under his desk again and piled them two-deep in front of Shari and me.

"You heard what Dr. King said," Wally reminded me. "She'll love you no less for being a PC. Now we'll play the game a little more realistically. Every time you guess the top card right, Tex, I'm going to give you a thousand dollars. No strings attached. When you miss, you give one back. But if you have none to give, you don't have to pay. You can't lose. Maybe you can win. All set?"

"One minute," I demanded. "Shari, is this a fair test?"

She shrugged. "Why not?"

"Is it gambling?"

She smiled faintly, her first sign of relaxation. "Hardly," she said.

"Then you don't mind if I win?"

She found a laugh this time. "You can try," she corrected me.

"This could be our nest egg," I said.

She blushed. "If that's a proposal," she said tartly. "The answer is 'no.'"

"I'll talk to you later," I growled. "When I'm richer!"

I looked at the back of the card on the desk. Wally was leaning back in his swivel chair and wasn't within four feet of the pasteboards. If there was any hanky-panky, I couldn't see how he planned to work it.

"Heart," I said.

"Why don't you turn it over, Dr. King?" Wally suggested. "Remove any possible chance of manipulation." It was the two of hearts that Shari turned over. I was a thousand dollars richer.

I won the next. And the next. My stomach tightened up. Every thousand dollars drove another nail into my coffin—went that much farther to prove I was a snake. Well, I wasn't!

I missed the fourth one.

"Cut that out!" Wally snapped at me. I jumped a foot. I had tried to miss it.

With a sickening realization of doom, I called the next four right.

"Stop it!" Shari screeched, grabbing at the cards. "I'll shuffle!" she announced. She hid the pasteboards from me with her body, and took care, in putting them before me on the desk, that I didn't see the face of the bottom card.

Her eyes were violet pools of hate and rage and she spoke to me: "Now try it!"

"Spade!" That made eight straight.

Even Shari succumbed to the ghastly fascination of it. There had been fifty thousand dollars in the stack of bills Wally had taken from his desk. Soon all

fifty of the bills were stacked in front of me. Except for the one time I had tried to, I had never missed.

Lefty stuck his sharp chin at Shari. "I'd call that a fairly convincing string," he said. "Will you concede, Dr. King?"

She gave him an awful mouthful of silence. A pitiless blackness descended over my spirit. I looked at the money in front of me. It had been like selling my soul to the Devil. There it was, all that money. All I'd had to give up was any claim to being a human—I wasn't a Normal any more. I was a psi!

Then Shari was talking, in short gasping bursts, half choking, half sobbing. "No wonder Tex is in a whirl," she said. "I've seen some good illusions, worked by the best light-fingered operators in the country, but nothing to compare with this! Just let me see you match this charade in my laboratory! With my apparatus!" She meant her playing cards.

Wally was sweet and reasonable. "You dealt and shuffled most of the hands yourself," he reminded her. "I never touched the cards. How could I control them?" He grinned a little more sharply. "And you can't call it TK," he went on. "Did you feel the cards move or twitch or resist you as you shuffled them? It has to be PC."

She blew her top on that one. It's sickening to see someone you love goaded past all endurance and break down into screams and wild gestures.

"Aah!" she cried, shaking her head blindly. "Before I believe that Tex Robertson can feel things that I can't feel, I'll accept any other explanation. What are those cards of yours? Small TV screens? Is this more electronic hokum?"

Wally quietly tore one of the cards in two. "Now I understand," he said. "That's the real reason."

I looked my surprise at him, and Shari quieted down just a little. "Relax, Dr. King," he advised her. "The possession of psi powers isn't a mark of moral superiority. Part of the problem in the Lodge is that psi powers are possessed as often by evil and stupid people as by the good and intelligent. Yes, I know that you think you deserve precognition, Dr. King. But that ain't the way the ball bounces. You're a Normal, Dr. King, and that's all you'll ever be."

He got a face full of fingers for his trouble. Shari leaped to her feet and really slapped him in the kisser. She stormed out of there. I started to follow, but a tug at my earlobe signaled me to stop.

"Hold on a minute, Tex," Wally said sympathetically. "You're one of us now."

I had to go after her. "I love her," I said hopelessly. "I can't see her hurt and upset like that. I've got to—"

But he was shaking his head. "You haven't got a chance," Wally said. "She'll never forgive you for having precognition. That's why she made the study of psi her life-work. She's wanted PC for herself, and was sure she was pure enough of heart to deserve to have the power. Well, she doesn't have it, and she'll hate you for having what she thinks she deserves. Forget her."

Talk about your cup brimming over! Well, if I had to get used to being cut off from the human race, perhaps Shari was the place to start. That's what happens to superhumans!

There was one desperate hope. "This wasn't hallucination?" I tried.

"No, Tex," he said calmly. "This was on the level. Just for fun," he went on. "Can you do it when there isn't any money riding on it?"

Reluctantly I came back to his desk and looked down at the back of the top card. "Heart," I said dully. I hit ten in a row for him. The spade was on top four times, the heart six times.

"And was that on the level?" I asked.

He scowled at me and chewed his thin lips. "Yeah," he said.

"That settles it," I said, sagging back into my seat. "I'm a snake. A rotten PC!"

"Don't you believe it!" Wally growled, lunging out of his chair. He started to pace back and forth across the office, his chin stuck way out ahead of him as he prowled. "I don't know what you are, Tex," he declared. "But you're no PC!"

"I'm a Normal after all!" I gasped, feeling a surge of blessed relief.

He swiped at the air with a hand. "Don't be silly!" he snapped. "You've got a psi power so incredible that—" He whirled on me while I died for good.

"You explain it," he insisted. "After your lovely Dr. King flew out of here, I shuffled the cards ten times under the desk, and you hit ten in a row, right?"

"Right." Dismally.

"I cheated on the shuffle," he told me. "I used TK to make sure that I put the two of spades on top all ten times."

"No," I insisted. "Six times the heart was on top. You turned them over yourself."

"That's just it," he whispered, leaning toward me. "I put that spade on top every time! I did! But when I turned it over, more than half the time it was a heart. What did you do?"

"You mean I'm a hallucinator?" I asked. "Look, this is getting ridiculous! I was kidding myself, too?"

"Nonsense. It was real." His face jerked in surprise. "You couldn't!" he gasped, as the idea hit him. "But you did!" he reminded himself. "Wait till Maragon hears this!"

And then he told me. It couldn't be, I knew. But it was. He proved it to me—or I proved it to us.

At some stage you have to get excited about it, if it's no more than a grisly fascination. At that, it was dawn before we could stop our intoxicated talk. Maragon had been yanked out of bed again, and when he heard the news, woke up a darned sight faster than the night before. Pheola of the race-horse legs joined us, and several other psis as well. Before it was over the Grand Master had put on a ridiculous piece of regalia and mumbled me into probationary membership in the Lodge. There was nothing creepy about the ritual—only about the way I felt.

I guess, if we hadn't gotten hungry, we'd be there yet. Wally had one last little wrinkle for me as I started down

the corridor for the elevator.

"Pheola," he called.

"Yes, darlin' Billy," she said, coming to his side.

"How's Tex going to make out with that overeducated iceberg he's hot after?" he asked her. I flinched at the thought of Shari—I was getting used to considering her a memory.

Pheola looked into the corner for a moment. "Oh, yum!" she said, smiling and showing the braces on her teeth. She kissed me. I think I was about as startled as Wally was. "Just so you let her be the only Cassandra," she said. "And you call that an iceberg?" She looked at me curiously. "You'd better start eating red meat, Tex," she told me, and would say no more.

I had a heck of a time getting Shari on the 'phone. An hour before lunch she caved in and accepted my call.

She looked pale and shaken, even in the black and white of the screen. "Please," she said. "I've had all I can stand. You stayed there all night, didn't you?"

"I'm not a PC, Shari," I said.

Nothing else would have caught her ear.

"Not?"

"Proved it before I left," I said. "I can prove it to you, too."

"Ridiculous. You can't prove a negative."

"Well, in a manner of speaking. What I can do is show you how the card trick was worked."

I had her hooked. "You mean it? It really was a trick after all?" she said, slumping.

"It sure wasn't PC," I said. "Let me show you."

"At the lab," Shari said. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

A couple graduate students were there, fooling around with Rhine cards when we arrived, and Shari chased them out without ceremony. She locked the door behind them. We were to have privacy. She didn't bother with her lab coat this time.

"Show me," she insisted.

"The apparatus, Shari," I grinned. She gave me a deck of cards, and pulled out the two of hearts and two of spades.

"We'll do it face-up," I said. "So you can see how it's done!"

I laid the two cards side by side on her blotter, face up. "Now put a finger on each one." I directed. "And watch them like a hawk. What card is under your right forefinger?"

"Heart," Shari said.

"Wrong," I told her. "Spade."

They could have heard that shriek clear to Keokuk. Good thing we were in a sound-proof laboratory.

I got her calmed down after a while. "It didn't happen!" she insisted, clutching at her temples.

"If you won't holler," I said. "I'll do it again. Remember, it's just a phenomenon, like osmosis."

"It is not!" she gasped.

But I did it for her. Ten times in a row. The cards changed under her fingers without moving.

"So it's not PC," I said.

"Oh, Tex, but what is it?"

"You agree it's real?"

Shari nodded. "It's real. You can do it, whatever it is. What is it?"

"TK," I told her. "Telekinesis."

"Nonsense," she said. "Are you trying to make me believe I wouldn't have felt the cards move if you'd snapped them out from under my fingers? I was pressing hard on them every time."

"I didn't move the cards," I explained.

"But you said it was telekinesis!"

"Sure. I just moved the molecules of pigment in the printing ink and reassembled them in the opposite cards. You didn't expect to feel molecular movement, did you?"

"No. Then it really happened?" I nodded. "What an incredible power!" she said. A glow of satisfaction spread over me. "Can you really test this molecular hypothesis?" she asked.

I told her of the hours of demonstrations I had made during the night. "The perception on scanning part of it goes on at some subconscious level, Shari," I said. "But we had evidence that it can be made completely conscious."

She shuddered and hugged her arms to herself. "I hate to say this to you," she said. "But you're a freak."

I took a deep breath and smiled. "Unique is the way the Grand Master puts it," I said, pleased with myself. "He says it has terrific possibilities." And then it hit me, that delicious thought that I was among the elect, that I always had been.

"What possibilities?" Shari demanded, recoiling from me. "Doing card tricks?"

"To name a few," I said. "They feel sure I can operate directly on the molecular chain in genes. This means we can alter heredity to suit ourselves. Next, why not rearrange the DNA molecule in a cancer? If you can change the genes in one cell, you can change them in another. Knock out the ability of cancerous cells to reproduce their own kind and the cancer disappears. A silly one: Maragon says I can be a one-man catalytic cracking station. Pipe a liquid through a tube within my TK range and I can make an equilibrium reaction run uphill as the stuff flows past me. How about a one-step operation to produce those rare drugs that now take forty-nine separate reactions?"

"This does have a significance for science," she admitted. "The genetic part is right down your alley. And it's not PC, is it?"

"Strictly TK," I told her. "You're the only PC in the family."

"Family?" She turned pink as I went around the desk after her. "I told you the answer was 'no.'"

"I have inside information," I said, pulling her to me. "One of the PC's up at the chapter house said this was what would happen."

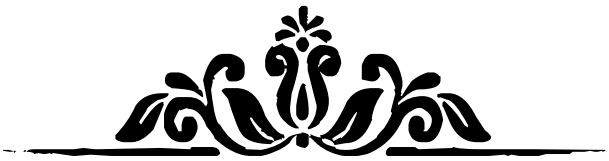
She didn't fight my kiss more than a couple seconds. Then it was a pure case of self-preservation for me. This girl was a tiger. Looks can be awfully deceiving. But she broke away from me.

"Tex!" she gasped. "Stop, honey! Suppose somebody walks in."

"A PC like you never gets that kind of surprise," I lied valiantly.

"Am I?" she whispered. "Am I really a PC?"

"That's why you locked the door," I said. "Remember?"



THE CALM MAN

Sally watched the molten gold glow in the sky. Then knew she would not see her son and her husband ever again on Earth.

Sally Anders had never really thought of herself as a wallflower. A girl could be shy, couldn't she, and still be pretty enough to attract and hold men?

Only this morning she had drawn an admiring look from the milkman and a wolf cry from Jimmy on the corner, with his newspapers and shiny new bike. What if the milkman was crowding sixty and wore thick-lensed glasses? What if Jimmy was only seventeen?

A male was a male, and a glance was a glance. Why, if I just primp a little more, Sally told herself, I'll be irresistible.

Hair ribbons and perfume, a mirror tilted at just the right angle, an invitation to a party on the dresser—what more did a girl need?

"Dinner, Sally!" came echoing up from the kitchen. "Do you want to be late, child?"

Sally had no intention of being late. Tonight she'd see him across a crowded room and her heart would skip a beat. He'd look at her and smile, and come straight toward her with his shoulders squared.

There was always one night in a girl's life that stands above all other nights. One night when the moon shone bright and clear and the clock on the wall went tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. One night when each tick said, "You're beautiful! Really beautiful!"

Giving her hair a final pat Sally smiled at herself in the mirror.

In the bathroom the water was still running and the perfumed bath soap still spread its aromatic sweet odor through the room. Sally went into the bathroom and turned off the tap before going downstairs to the kitchen.

"My girl looks radiant tonight!" Uncle Ben said, smiling at her over his corned beef and cabbage.

Sally blushed and lowered her eyes.

"Ben, you're making her nervous," Sally's mother said, laughing.

Sally looked up and met her uncle's stare, her eyes defiant. "I'm not bad-looking whatever you may think," she said.

"Oh, now, Sally," Uncle Ben protested. "No sense in getting on a high horse. Tonight you may find a man who just won't be able to resist you."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," Sally said. "You'd be surprised if I did, wouldn't you?"

It was Uncle Ben's turn to lower his eyes.

"I'll tell the world you've inherited your mother's looks, Sally," he said. "But a man has to pride himself on something. My defects of character are pretty bad. But no one has ever accused me of dishonesty."

Sally folded her napkin and rose stiffly from the table.

"Good night, Uncle," she said.

When Sally arrived at the party every foot of floor space was taken up by dancing couples and the reception room was so crowded that, as each new guest was announced, a little ripple of displeasure went through the men in midnight blue and the women in Nile green and lavender.

For a moment Sally did not move, just stood staring at the dancing couples, half-hidden by one of the potted palms that framed the sides of the long room.

Moonlight silvered her hair and touched her white throat and arms with a caress so gentle that simply by closing her eyes she could fancy herself already in his arms.

Moonlight from tall windows flooding down, turning the dancing guests into pirouetting ghosts in diaphanous blue and green, scarlet and gold.

Close your eyes, Sally, close them tight! Now open them! That's it ... Slowly, slowly ...

He came out of nothingness into the light and was right beside her suddenly.

He was tall, but not too tall. His face was tanned mahogany brown, and his eyes were clear and very bright. And he stood there looking at her steadily until her mouth opened and a little gasp flew out.

He took her into his arms without a word and they started to dance ...

They were still dancing when he asked her to be his wife.

"You'll marry me, of course," he said. "We haven't too much time. The years go by so swiftly, like great white birds at sea."

They were very close when he asked her, but he made no attempt to kiss her. They went right on dancing and while he waited for her answer he talked about the moon ...

"When the lights go out and the music stops the moon will remain," he said. "It raises tides on the Earth, it inflames the minds and hearts of men. There are cyclic rhythms which would set a stone to dreaming and desiring on such a night as this."

He stopped dancing abruptly and looked at her with calm assurance.

"You will marry me, won't you?" he asked. "Allowing for a reasonable margin of error I seriously doubt if I could be happy with any of these other women. I was attracted to you the instant I saw you."

A girl who has never been asked before, who has drawn only one lone wolf cry from a newsboy could hardly be expected to resist such an offer.

Don't resist, Sally. He's strong and tall and extremely good-looking. He knows what he wants and makes up his mind quickly. Surely a man so resolute must make enough money to support a wife.

"Yes," Sally breathed, snuggling close to him. "Oh, yes!"

She paused a moment, then said, "You may kiss me now if you wish, my darling."

He straightened and frowned a little, and looked away quickly. "That can wait," he said.

They were married a week later and went to live on an elm-shaded street just five blocks from where Sally was born. The cottage was small, white and attractively decorated inside and out. But Sally changed the curtains, as all women must, and bought some new furniture on the installment plan.

The neighbors were friendly folk who knew her husband as Mr. James Rand, an energetic young insurance broker who would certainly carve a wider swath for himself in his chosen profession now that he had so charming a wife.

Ten months later the first baby came.

Lying beneath cool white sheets in the hospital Sally looked at the other women and felt so deliriously happy she wanted to cry. It was a beautiful baby and it cuddled close to her heart, its smallness a miracle in itself.

The other husbands came in and sat beside their wives, holding on tight to their happiness. There were flowers and smiles, whispers that explored bright new worlds of tenderness and rejoicing.

Out in the corridor the husbands congratulated one another and came in smelling of cigar smoke.

"Have a cigar! That's right. Eight pounds at birth. That's unusual, isn't it? Brightest kid you ever saw. Knew his old man right off."

He was beside her suddenly, standing straight and still in shadows.

"Oh, darling," she whispered. "Why did you wait? It's been three whole days."

"Three days?" he asked, leaning forward to stare down at his son. "Really! It didn't seem that long."

"Where were you? You didn't even phone!"

"Sometimes it's difficult to phone," he said slowly, as if measuring his words. "You have given me a son. That pleases me very much."

A coldness touched her heart and a despair took hold of her. "It pleases you! Is that all you can say? You stand there looking at me as if I were a—a patient ..."

"A patient?" His expression grew quizzical. "Just what do you mean, Sally?"

"You said you were pleased. If a patient is ill her doctor hopes that she will get well. He is pleased when she does. If a woman has a baby a doctor will say, 'I'm so pleased. The baby is doing fine. You don't have to worry about him. I've put him on the scales and he's a bouncing, healthy boy.'"

"Medicine is a sane and wise profession," Sally's husband said. "When I look at my son that is exactly what I would say to the mother of my son. He is healthy and strong. You have pleased me, Sally."

He bent as he spoke and picked

Sally's son up. He held the infant in the crook of his arm, smiling down at it.

"A healthy male child," he said. "His hair will come in thick and black. Soon he will speak, will know that I am his father."

He ran his palm over the baby's smooth head, opened its mouth gently with his forefinger and looked inside.

Sally rose on one elbow, her tormented eyes searching his face.

"He's your child, your son!" she sobbed. "A woman has a child and her husband comes and puts his arms around her. He holds her close. If they love each other they are so happy, so very happy, they break down and cry."

"I am too pleased to do anything so fantastic, Sally," he said. "When a child is born no tears should be shed by its parents. I have examined the child and I am pleased with it. Does not that content you?"

"No, it doesn't!" Sally almost shrieked. "Why do you stare at your own son as if you'd never seen a baby before? He isn't a mechanical toy. He's our own darling, adorable little baby. Our child! How can you be so inhumanly calm?"

He frowned, put the baby down.

"There is a time for love-making and a time for parenthood," he said. "Parenthood is a serious responsibility. That is where medicine comes in, surgery. If a child is not perfect there are emergency measures which can be taken to correct the defect."

Sally's mouth went suddenly dry. "Perfect! What do you mean, Jim? Is there something wrong with Tommy?"

"I don't think so," her husband said. "His grasp is firm and strong. He has good hearing and his eyesight appears to be all that could be desired. Did you notice how his eyes followed me every moment?"

"I wasn't looking at his eyes!" Sally whispered, her voice tight with alarm. "Why are you trying to frighten me, Jim? If Tommy wasn't a normal, healthy baby do you imagine for one instant they would have placed him in my arms?"

"That is a very sound observation," Sally's husband said. "Truth is truth, but to alarm you at a time like this would be unnecessarily cruel."

"Where does that put you?"

"I simply spoke my mind as the child's father. I had to speak as I did because of my natural concern for the health of our child. Do you want me to stay and talk to you, Sally?"

Sally shook her head. "No, Jim. I won't let you torture me any more."

Sally drew the baby into her arms again and held it tightly. "I'll scream if you stay!" she warned. "I'll become hysterical unless you leave."

"Very well," her husband said. "I'll come back tomorrow."

He bent as he spoke and kissed her on the forehead. His lips were ice cold.

For eight years Sally sat across the table from her husband at breakfast, her eyes fixed upon a nothingness on the green-blue wall at his back. Calm he remained even while eating. The eggs she placed before him he cracked methodically with a knife and consumed

behind a tilted newspaper, taking now an assured sip of coffee, now a measured glance at the clock.

The presence of his young son bothered him not at all. Tommy could be quiet or noisy, in trouble at school, or with an A for good conduct tucked with his report card in his soiled leather zipper jacket. It was always: "Eat slowly, my son. Never gulp your food. Be sure to take plenty of exercise today. Stay in the sun as much as possible."

Often Sally wanted to shriek: "Be a father to him! A real father! Get down on the floor and play with him. Shoot marbles with him, spin one of his tops. Remember the toy locomotive you gave him for Christmas after I got hysterical and screamed at you? Remember the beautiful little train? Get it out of the closet and wreck it accidentally. He'll warm up to you then. He'll be broken-hearted, but he'll feel close to you, then you'll know what it means to have a son!"

Often Sally wanted to fly at him, beat with her fists on his chest. But she never did.

You can't warm a stone by slapping it, Sally. You'd only bruise yourself. A stone is neither cruel nor tender. You've married a man of stone, Sally.

He hasn't missed a day at the office in eight years. She'd never visited the office but he was always there to answer when she phoned. "I'm very busy, Sally. What did you say? You've bought a new hat? I'm sure it will look well on you, Sally. What did you say? Tommy got into a fight with a new boy in the neighborhood? You must take better care of him, Sally."

There are patterns in every marriage. When once the mold has set, a few strange behavior patterns must be accepted as a matter of course.

"I'll drop in at the office tomorrow, darling!" Sally had promised right after the breakfast pattern had become firmly established. The desire to see where her husband worked had been from the start a strong, bright flame in her. But he asked her to wait a while before visiting his office.

A strong will can dampen the brightest flame, and when months passed and he kept saying 'no,' Sally found herself agreeing with her husband's suggestion that the visit be put off indefinitely.

Snuff a candle and it stays snuffed. A marriage pattern once established requires a very special kind of re-kindling. Sally's husband refused to supply the needed spark.

Whenever Sally had an impulse to turn her steps in the direction of the office a voice deep in her mind seemed to whisper: "No sense in it, Sally. Stay away. He's been mean and spiteful about it all these years. Don't give in to him now by going."

Besides, Tommy took up so much of her time. A growing boy was always a problem and Tommy seemed to have a special gift for getting into things because he was so active. And he went through his clothes, wore out his shoes almost faster than she could replace them.

Right now Tommy was playing in the

yard. Sally's eyes came to a focus upon him, crouching by a hole in the fence which kindly old Mrs. Wallingford had erected as a protection against the prying inquisitiveness of an eight-year-old determined to make life miserable for her.

A thrice-widowed neighbor of seventy without a spiteful hair in her head could put up with a boy who rollicked and yelled perhaps. But peep-hole spying was another matter.

Sally muttered: "Enough of that!" and started for the kitchen door. Just as she reached it the telephone rang.

Sally went quickly to the phone and lifted the receiver. The instant she pressed it to her ear she recognized her husband's voice—or thought she did.

"Sally, come to the office!" came the voice, speaking in a hoarse whisper. "Hurry—or it will be too late! Hurry, Sally!"

Sally turned with a startled gasp, looked out through the kitchen window at the autumn leaves blowing crisp and dry across the lawn. As she looked the scattered leaves whirled into a flurry around Tommy, then lifted and went spinning over the fence and out of sight.

The dread in her heart gave way to a sudden, bleak despair. As she turned from the phone something within her withered, became as dead as the drifting leaves with their dark autumnal mottlings.

She did not even pause to call Tommy in from the yard. She rushed upstairs, then down again, gathering up her hat, gloves and purse, making sure she had enough change to pay for the taxi.

The ride to the office was a nightmare ... Tall buildings swept past, facades of granite as gray as the leaden skies of mid-winter, beehives of commerce where men and women brushed shoulders without touching hands.

Autumnal leaves blowing, and the gray buildings sweeping past. Despite Tommy, despite everything there was no shining vision to warm Sally from within. A cottage must be lived in to become a home and Sally had never really had a home.

One-night stand! It wasn't an expression she'd have used by choice, but it came unbidden into her mind. If you live for nine years with a man who can't relax and be human, who can't be warm and loving you'll begin eventually to feel you might as well live alone. Each day had been like a lonely sentinel outpost in a desert waste for Sally.

She thought about Tommy ... Tommy wasn't in the least like his father when he came racing home from school, hair tousled, books dangling from a strap. Tommy would raid the pantry with unthinking zest, invite other boys in to look at the Westerns on TV, and trade black eyes for marbles with a healthy pugnacity.

Up to a point Tommy was normal, was healthy.

But she had seen mirrored in Tommy's pale blue eyes the same abnormal calmness that was always in his father's, and the look of derisive withdrawal which made him seem always to

be staring down at her from a height. And it filled her with terror to see that Tommy's mood could change as abruptly and terrifyingly cold ...

Tommy, her son. Tommy, no longer boisterous and eager, but sitting in a corner with his legs drawn up, a faraway look in his eyes. Tommy seeming to look right through her, into space. Tommy and Jim exchanging silent understanding glances. Tommy roaming through the cottage, staring at his toys with frowning disapproval. Tommy drawing back when she tried to touch him.

Tommy, Tommy, come back to me! How often she had cried out in her heart when that coldness came between them.

Tommy drawing strange figures on the floor with a piece of colored chalk, then erasing them quickly before she could see them, refusing to let her enter his secret child's world.

Tommy picking up the cat and stroking its fur mechanically, while he stared out through the kitchen window at rusty blackbirds on the wing ...

"This is the address you gave me, lady. Sixty-seven Vine Street," the cab driver was saying.

Sally shivered, remembering her husband's voice on the phone, remembering where she was ... "Come to the office, Sally! Hurry, hurry—or it will be too late!"

Too late for what? Too late to recapture a happiness she had never possessed?

"This is it, lady!" the cab driver insisted. "Do you want me to wait?"

"No," Sally said, fumbling for her change purse. She descended from the taxi, paid the driver and hurried across the pavement to the big office building with its mirroring frontage of plate glass and black onyx tiles.

The firm's name was on the directory board in the lobby, white on black in beautifully embossed lettering. White for hope, and black for despair, mourning ...

The elevator opened and closed and Sally was whisked up eight stories behind a man in a checkered suit.

"Eighth floor!" Sally whispered, in sudden alarm. The elevator jolted to an abrupt halt and the operator swung about to glare at her.

"You should have told me when you got on, Miss!" he complained.

"Sorry," Sally muttered, stumbling out into the corridor. How horrible it must be to go to business every day, she thought wildly. To sit in an office, to thumb through papers, to bark orders, to be a machine.

Sally stood very still for an instant, startled, feeling her sanity threatened by the very absurdity of the thought. People who worked in offices could turn for escape to a cottage in the sunset's glow, when they were set free by the moving hands of a clock. There could be a fierce joy at the thought of deliverance, at the prospect of going home at five o'clock.

But for Sally was the brightness, the deliverance withheld. The corridor was wide and deserted and the black tiles with their gold borders seemed to con-

verge upon her, hemming her into a cool magnificence as structurally somber as the architectural embellishments of a costly mausoleum.

She found the office with her surface mind, working at cross-purposes with the confusion and swiftly mounting dread which made her footsteps falter, her mouth go dry.

Steady, Sally! Here's the office, here's the door. Turn the knob and get it over with ...

Sally opened the door and stepped into a small, deserted reception room. Beyond the reception desk was a gate, and beyond the gate a large central office branched off into several smaller offices.

Sally paused only an instant. It seemed quite natural to her that a business office should be deserted so late in the afternoon.

She crossed the reception room to the gate, passed through it, utter desperation giving her courage.

Something within her whispered that she had only to walk across the central office, open the first door she came to to find her husband ...

The first door combined privacy with easy accessibility. The instant she opened the door she knew that she had been right to trust her instincts. This was his office ...

He was sitting at a desk by the window, a patch of sunset sky visible over his right shoulder. His elbows rested on the desk and his hands were tightly locked as if he had just stopped wringing them.

He was looking straight at her, his eyes wide and staring.

"Jim!" Sally breathed. "Jim, what's wrong?"

He did not answer, did not move or attempt to greet her in any way. There was no color at all in his face. His lips were parted, his white teeth gleamed. And he was more stiffly controlled than usual—a control so intense that for once Sally felt more alarm than bitterness.

There was a rising terror in her now. And a slowly dawning horror. The sunlight streamed in, gleaming redly on his hair, his shoulders. He seemed to be the center of a flaming red ball ...

He sent for you, Sally. Why doesn't he get up and speak to you, if only to pour salt on the wounds you've borne for eight long years?

Poor Sally! You wanted a strong, protective, old-fashioned husband. What have you got instead?

Sally went up to the desk and looked steadily into eyes so calm and blank that they seemed like the eyes of a child lost in some dreamy wonderland barred forever to adult understanding.

For an instant her terror ebbed and she felt almost reassured. Then she made the mistake of bending more closely above him, brushing his right elbow with her sleeve.

That single light woman's touch unsettled him. He started to fall, sideways and very fast. Topple a dead weight and it crashes with a swiftness no opposing force can counter-balance.

It did Sally no good to clutch frantically at his arm as he fell, to tug and jerk

at the slackening folds of his suit. The heaviness of his descending bulk dragged him down and away from her, the awful inertia of lifeless flesh.

He thudded to the floor and rolled over on his back, seeming to shrink as Sally widened her eyes upon him. He lay in a grotesque sprawl at her feet, his jaw hanging open on the gaping black orifice of his mouth ...

Sally might have screamed and gone right on screaming—if she had been a different kind of woman. On seeing her husband lying dead her impulse might have been to throw herself down beside him, give way to her grief in a wild fit of sobbing.

But where there was no grief there could be no sobbing ...

One thing only she did before she left. She unloosed the collar of the unmoving form on the floor and looked for the small brown mole she did not really expect to find. The mole she knew to be on her husband's shoulder, high up on the left side.

She had noticed things that made her doubt her sanity; she needed to see the little black mole to reassure her ...

She had noticed the difference in the hair-line, the strange slant of the eyebrows, the crinkly texture of the skin where it should have been smooth ...

Something was wrong ... horribly, weirdly wrong ...

Even the hands of the sprawled form seemed larger and hairier than the hands of her husband. Nevertheless it was important to be sure ...

The absence of the mole clinched it.

Sally crouched beside the body, carefully readjusting the collar. Then she got up and walked out of the office.

Some homecomings are joyful, others cruel. Sitting in the taxi, clenching and unclenching her hands, Sally had no plan that could be called a plan, no hope that was more than a dim flickering in a vast wasteland, bleak and unexplored.

But it was strange how one light burning brightly in a cottage window could make even a wasteland seem small, could shrink and diminish it until it became no more than a patch of darkness that anyone with courage might cross.

The light was in Tommy's room and there was a whispering behind the door. Sally could hear the whispering as she tiptoed upstairs, could see the light streaming out into the hall.

She paused for an instant at the head of the stairs, listening. There were two voices in the room, and they were talking back and forth.

Sally tiptoed down the hall, stood with wildly beating heart just outside the door.

"She knows now, Tommy," the deepest of the two voices said. "We are very close, your mother and I. She knows now that I sent her to the office to find my 'stand in.' Oh, it's an amusing term, Tommy—an Earth term we'd hardly use on Mars. But it's a term your mother would understand."

A pause, then the voice went on, "You see, my son, it has taken me eight years to repair the ship. And in eight years a man can wither up and die by

inches if he does not have a growing son to go adventuring with him in the end."

"Adventuring, father?"

"You have read a good many Earth books, my son, written especially for boys. Treasure Island, Robinson Crusoe, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea. What paltry books they are! But in them there is a little of the fire, a little of the glow of our world."

"No, father. I started them but I threw them away for I did not like them."

"As you and I must throw away all Earth things, my son. I tried to be kind to your mother, to be a good husband as husbands go on Earth. But how could I feel proud and strong and reckless by her side? How could I share her paltry joys and sorrows, chirp with delight as a sparrow might chirp hopping about in the grass? Can an eagle pretend to be a sparrow? Can the thunder muffle its voice when two white-crested clouds collide in the shining depths of the night sky?"

"You tried, father. You did your best."

"Yes, my son, I did try. But if I had attempted to feign emotions I did not feel your mother would have seen through the pretense. She would then have turned from me completely. Without her I could not have had you, my son."

"And now, father, what will we do?"

"Now the ship has been repaired and is waiting for us. Every day for eight years I went to the hill and worked on the ship. It was badly wrecked, my son, but now my patience has been rewarded, and every damaged astronavigation instrument has been replaced."

"You never went to the office, father? You never went at all?"

"No, my son. My stand-in worked at the office in my place. I instilled in your mother's mind an intense dislike and fear of the office to keep her from ever coming face to face with the stand-in. She might have noticed the difference. But I had to have a stand-in, as a safeguard. Your mother might have gone to the office despite the mental block."

"She's gone now, father. Why did you send for her?"

"To avoid what she would call a scene, my son. That I could not endure. I had the stand-in summon her on the office telephone, then I withdrew all vitality from it. She will find it quite lifeless. But it does not matter now. When she returns we will be gone."

"Was constructing the stand-in difficult, father?"

"Not for me, my son. On Mars we have many androids, each constructed to perform a specific task. Some are ingenious beyond belief—or would seem so to Earthmen."

There was a pause, then the weaker of the two voices said, "I will miss my mother. She tried to make me happy. She tried very hard."

"You must be brave and strong, my son. We are eagles, you and I. Your mother is a sparrow, gentle and dun-colored. I shall always remember her with tenderness. You want to go with me, don't you?"

"Yes, father. Oh, yes!"

"Then come, my son. We must hurry. Your mother will be returning any minute now."

Sally stood motionless, listening to the voices like a spectator sitting before a television screen. A spectator can see as well as hear, and Sally could visualize her son's pale, eager face so clearly there was no need for her to move forward into the room.

She could not move. And nothing on Earth could have wrenched a tortured cry from her. Grief and shock may paralyze the mind and will, but Sally's will was not paralyzed.

It was as if the thread of her life had been cut, with only one light left burning. Tommy was that light. He would never change. He would go from her forever. But he would always be her son.

The door of Tommy's room opened and Tommy and his father came out into the hall. Sally stepped back into shadows and watched them walk quickly down the hall to the stairs, their voices low, hushed. She heard them descend the stairs, their footsteps dwindle, die away into silence ...

You'll see a light, Sally, a great glow lighting up the sky. The ship must be very beautiful. For eight years he labored over it, restoring it with all the shining gifts of skill and feeling at his command. He was calm toward you, but not toward the ship, Sally—the ship which will take him back to Mars!

How is it on Mars, she wondered. My son, Tommy, will become a strong, proud adventurer daring the farthest planet of the farthest star?

You can't stop a boy from adventuring. Surprise him at his books and you'll see tropical seas in his eyes, a pearly nautilus, Hong Kong and Valparaiso resplendent in the dawn.

There is no strength quite like the strength of a mother, Sally. Endure it, be brave ...

Sally was at the window when it came. A dazzling burst of radiance, starting from the horizon's rim and spreading across the entire sky. It lit up the cottage and flickered over the lawn, turning rooftops to molten gold and gilding the long line of rolling hills which hemmed in the town.

Brighter it grew and brighter, gilding for a moment even Sally's bowed head and her image mirrored on the pane. Then, abruptly, it was gone ...